

Harry Potter and the Ring of Reduction

semprini

Harry Potter and the Ring of Reduction

by *semprini*

Rated: [Fiction T](#) - English - Adventure - Harry P., Hermione G.
- Chapters: 24 - Words: 473,064 - Reviews: [114](#) - Favs: 234 -
Follows: 98 - Updated: 11/15/2009 - Published: 10/22/2009 -
Status: Complete - id: 5459468

URL: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/5459468>

Table Of Contents

1. [Harry Potter and the Ring of Reduction by semprini](#)
2. [- Table Of Contents -](#)
3. [1. Chapter 1](#)
4. [2. Chapter 2](#)
5. [3. Chapter 3](#)
6. [4. Chapter 4](#)
7. [5. Chapter 5](#)
8. [6. Chapter 6](#)
9. [7. Chapter 7](#)
10. [8. Chapter 8](#)
11. [9. Chapter 9](#)
12. [10. Chapter 10](#)
13. [11. Chapter 11](#)
14. [12. Chapter 12](#)
15. [13. Chapter 13](#)
16. [14. Chapter 14](#)
17. [15. Chapter 15](#)
18. [16. Chapter 16](#)
19. [17. Chapter 17](#)
20. [18. Chapter 18](#)
21. [19. Chapter 19](#)
22. [20. Chapter 20](#)
23. [21. Chapter 21](#)
24. [22. Chapter 22](#)
25. [23. Chapter 23](#)
26. [24. Chapter 24](#)

1. Chapter 1

Chapter 1

The Sunset

Relaxing in a recently conjured lawn chair, Harry Potter suddenly had a sense of feeling out of place, as though something was happening that was not supposed to be happening. The feeling only lasted a second, however. He quickly realized what it was, as he'd had it several times a day since coming to the Burrow from Hogwarts a week ago: it was summertime, and he was happy.

He smiled to himself as he wondered how long it would take for him to get used to the idea. Here I am, he thought, sitting outside in a lawn chair with Ginny, watching the sunset on a nice, warm summer evening, living in a house full of the people I feel closest to in the world. Last year on this day, he recalled, he was at 4 Privet Drive, surrounded by people who disliked him and who he disliked, isolated, and mourning the loss of his godfather, Sirius Black, for whose death he had felt responsible.

The thought caused his smile to fade, though he had long since accepted that he did not bear sole responsibility for what had happened. He still felt sad at having lost Sirius, but the feeling was now tempered by the certain knowledge that though Sirius was dead, his spirit still existed in a way Harry did not exactly understand. He knew now that no one who died was truly gone, since Albus Dumbledore had died a little over two weeks ago, but still had conversations with Harry as he slept. Harry didn't know how it worked, nor did he really care; what was important was that Dumbledore was not gone from Harry's life, and that Harry now knew from

direct personal experience that death was not the end of existence.

Ginny moved her head up from where it had been resting on his shoulder, and kissed him lightly on the lips. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"About how nice it is that I can kiss you any time I want," he replied, knowing his answer would both please and annoy her.

"I meant before that, as you know very well," she responded, though obviously happy with his answer.

He looked at the sunset again as he answered. "About what I was doing exactly a year ago right now, and it made me think of Sirius. I should ask Albus what Sirius is doing now."

"Whatever it is, it's probably something we couldn't understand all that well," she mused. "But at least he's there, somewhere. I'm so glad you get to know that." She rested her head on his shoulder again as he squeezed her shoulder gently.

"Me, too," he agreed. "And I'm still having trouble adjusting to being happy in the summer, but I suppose I've had worse problems." He paused, then after a minute, continued, "Funny how I never really stopped to look at sunsets before."

"Must be one of those things having a girlfriend does to you," said Ron with amusement, having just walked up behind them. "Next thing, you'll be picking flowers and writing her love poetry."

"That would be nice, but I'm happy with him the way he is," said Ginny, looking at Harry rather than Ron. Harry looked up at Ron in mild annoyance, then leaned over and gave

Ginny a lingering kiss, only partly to annoy Ron. She enthusiastically returned it, then looked up at her embarrassed brother and added, "Feel free to do that any time, Ron. It seems to work out well for me."

"Yes, I see that," responded Ron dryly. "Not that you two need much of an excuse. I think Mum sent me out here on purpose. She said something about wondering whether you could keep your lips off each other long enough to come in for dinner."

"Bet she was smiling when she said it," said Ginny confidently.

"I wasn't looking at her face, but it wouldn't shock me," conceded Ron. "I swear, I've never seen her so happy as when she's talking about you two. You could start ripping each other's clothes off in the living room, and she'd say, 'look at them, they're so cute.'"

Ginny grinned at Harry mischievously. "Let's give it a try, find out for sure." He smiled but said nothing as they got up and headed to the house.

After a few steps, Ron gestured behind them. "Harry," he said, pointing to the lawn chair. "Mum's already mentioned about you leaving conjured furniture lying around. Surprised you didn't say anything," he added to Ginny as Harry took out his wand and caused the chair to disappear.

She shrugged. "I don't care if he leaves stuff lying around. I'm not going to nag him."

"Wow, now that's true love," said Ron with raised eyebrows. "Get that in writing, Harry. See if you can work it into her part of the wedding vows."

"To love, honor, cherish, and not to nag, till death do us part," joked Ginny.

"And then, only for a while," put in Harry. Ginny smiled at him as they walked into the house.

"Ah, making plans to be together after you die, I see," said Ron, shaking his head. "Is that something you can do?"

"Not sure, I'll have to ask Albus," said Harry. He hadn't thought of it before, but now he wondered how that worked. "If we can, then I feel kind of bad for him. He could move on and be with his wife, but he's hanging around to help me."

"Didn't you say he's comfortable where he is?" asked Ron.

"Yes, he did say that, and apparently his wife won't have to experience the passage of time to wait for him if she doesn't want to," explained Ginny. "But he has to, so Harry's right, it's really good of him."

They were greeted by Pansy and Hermione as they stood in the living room, waiting for Molly to announce that dinner was ready. "It's so funny how you call him 'Albus' all the time now," commented Pansy.

"I guess when you're a spirit, words like 'Professor' or 'Headmaster' don't quite have meaning like they used to," said Harry. "It would just seem silly." Harry almost added that Snape still referred to Dumbledore as 'the headmaster,' but at the last second didn't, as mentioning Snape was a reminder of his duties helping Snape that most of the others weren't allowed to know. "So, is Neville coming tonight?"

Just as Harry finished his question there was a small explosion in the fireplace, and Neville walked out. Hermione walked over and took his hand, then answered Harry's

question. "Yes, it's Mondays and Fridays, and whatever other days I can pry him away from there. And I go there one of the weekend days."

"You know I'd be here pretty much all the time if it was just up to me," said Neville. "I sort of feel left out as it is, being the only one of the six of us not here."

"It's not such an awful thing, Neville," pointed out Ron. "It just means you're not a Weasley and your life's not under dire threat. And Mum did offer, you remember. I'm sure it's not too late to change your mind." Harry recalled the conversation at the dinner table the previous Friday in which Molly had extended the offer to Neville. Neville had explained that he'd have liked to accept, but he didn't want to leave his grandmother all alone. Watching Hermione during that conversation, Harry had the impression that the topic was one on which they'd disagreed; Harry wondered whether Hermione and Neville's grandmother were having a tug-of-war over Neville's time.

Molly walked into the room. "Hello, Neville, dear. Ron's right, of course, but it's sweet of you to think of your grandmother like that. Dinner's ready, everyone." They trooped into the dining room, where Arthur was already sitting at his usual spot. He greeted them as they sat down.

"How was work, Mr. Weasley?" asked Pansy. He raised his eyebrows at her. "Sorry, Arthur," she corrected herself. Molly and Arthur had asked all the non-Weasleys to use their first names, as all were of age, or soon would be.

"Just the usual," he sighed. "You'd think, with Voldemort still around and killing, people would find better things to do than mess around with Muggle stuff, but apparently not. Today someone went to a Muggle shop that sells brooms,

and turned them all into brooms that can fly. Not even very original, and of course they fly very poorly, so if a Muggle even tried... anyway, we didn't get the one who did it, but we're keeping our eyes open."

"So, I guess you do a lot of Memory Charms, then?" asked Neville.

Arthur grunted as he chewed a mouthful of chicken. "That's putting it mildly. If they paid me by the Memory Charm, we'd be rich. I've done it so much that I can tell if it's been done to someone recently even if I didn't know it was done. There's a certain look, it's very subtle, like they were thinking of something but can't quite remember what it was."

"You must be pretty good at it, then," said Neville.

Arthur smiled but said nothing. Ginny answered, "Sure, he is, Neville. I mean, we can't remember--"

Ron burst out laughing as Molly interrupted Ginny with a frustrated, "Please, Ginny, you know how long it took me to get your father to stop saying that, now don't you start." Harry noticed that Arthur was trying hard not to laugh.

As his laughter faded, Ron said, "Well, we have to explain it to them, they don't know what this is about." Molly shook her head and gave her daughter an annoyed look. Ron continued, "It's a joke Dad always used to make. Lots of people would at some point say what Neville said, and Dad would say, "Well, the kids can't remember all the times I beat them, so I guess so."

Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Pansy all chuckled. "The thing is," said Harry, "if Arthur was like, say, my uncle Vernon, it wouldn't be funny."

"Exactly, that's why it's funny," agreed Ginny. "Everyone knows Dad's the type that would never do that. It was never that funny to us kids, but only because we heard the joke so often. Ron only laughed because he knew it would annoy Mum."

"Such fine, wonderful children I have," said Molly in a humorously wounded tone. "One tries to annoy me, the other laughs at it. They'll have Harry doing it before long."

"Well, you know, Molly," said Harry, "We only tease the people we like. I really enjoyed it last year when the other teachers and the Aurors teased me, because I knew it meant they liked and accepted me."

"I'm so pleased to be 'accepted' by my children," said Molly, sounding earnest but obviously sarcastic. "It's always been a dream of mine. Thank you, Harry, for helping me to see that."

Harry smiled, pleased that she was teasing him now. "No problem." He then saw the gleam in Ginny's eye that he had come to know meant that a teasing remark was coming. Usually it was directed at him, but he didn't think it would be this time.

"Ron, don't you think that Hermione, Pansy, and Neville should be more 'accepting' of Mum?" she asked.

Ron and Arthur laughed. "Absolutely," agreed Ron.

"Sorry, Molly," said Hermione. "I've never even been all that 'accepting' of my own parents."

"Good for you, dear," replied Molly.

"Me neither," put in Pansy, though she looked as though she wished she had the sort of relationship with her mother that Ginny had with Molly.

"If I ever tried to be 'accepting' of Gran, I would really regret it," said Neville. Harry exchanged looks with Ron and Ginny, knowing that what Neville had said was possibly an understatement.

"Well, she struck me as a very sensible lady," said Molly approvingly.

"So, Neville, how does she feel about your spending so much time over here?" asked Arthur casually. Neville looked slightly alarmed at the question, and Harry saw Hermione and Molly react. Apparently Arthur had unwittingly stumbled onto a sensitive subject, Harry thought.

Neville thought for a few seconds. "I guess you could say she has mixed feelings. She's happy that I have Hermione, and the rest of you for friends, and I'm sure she understands that it's very tempting for me to want to come over, since everyone else in the group is here. But she's not used to me being gone so much in the summer, and I guess... it makes her feel like I'm leaving or something. I'm not sure, she doesn't say it exactly."

"I can certainly understand how she would feel," said Molly. "I know the time will come when this house will be empty, and I'm not looking forward to it. That's one of the reasons we had the bedrooms done this way, I'm hoping it'll be a dormitory for visiting grandchildren." Upon returning to the Burrow after the end of the last term, Harry, Ron, and Ginny had been surprised to discover that one of the changes made to the Burrow in May and June had been that walls had been taken out and four upstairs bedrooms had been made

into two larger ones. Harry and Ron were now occupying one, and Hermione, Ginny and Pansy, the other.

None of the teenagers were inclined to comment on the topic of Neville's situation, but Ginny seized on the mention of grandchildren; Harry wondered if she was trying to change the subject. "So, Mum, how soon did you want those grandchildren?"

"I can wait," she replied. Looking at Harry, she added, "I don't know if you were trying to tease me or Harry with that, but it looks like you really got him." Harry realized that his face must have been red.

"I was just thinking," said Hermione, "it would be interesting if in, let's say five years, all the Weasley children were married, and each couple had a child the same year. Eleven years later, they could fill up a Gryffindor dormitory, especially if they were mostly boys or mostly girls."

"Oh, Hermione, you're just getting my hopes up," said Molly. "That would be lovely."

"But they wouldn't all necessarily be Gryffindors, would they?" asked Ron. "I mean, we all were, and you two were," looking at his parents, "but suppose you had twenty grandchildren, they wouldn't all be Gryffindors."

Molly looked at Ron suspiciously. "Now I think you are trying to get me worked up. Twenty grandchildren... that's my idea of heaven. Now, you'd better not talk like that unless you're ready to do your bit."

"Well, not yet, anyway," allowed Ron. "Let's see, that works out to... three and a third per person. Harry and Ginny are thinking of four, so maybe I can get away with only three to hold up my end."

"Just like always, you try to slide by with the minimum effort necessary," joked Hermione.

"I do not," protested Ron, a bit feebly, Harry thought.

"Yeah, sure... I've seen you in the common room, asking her stuff before a big test or essay," mocked Ginny. "I can see it now, on your wedding night, you'll be calling her up...

'Hermione, I wasn't paying attention when it was explained to me, what is it I'm supposed to do, again?'" The table exploded with laughter from everyone except Ron, who Harry felt was annoyed, but knew he would be laughing if he hadn't been the target.

"I'm not going to dignify that with a response," said Ron loftily, as the laughter died down.

"Wise move, Ron," chuckled Neville.

"I thought so," agreed Ron.

"Would you like me to start a new subject, Ron," offered Harry, "one that doesn't involve making fun of you in any way?"

"That would be nice," replied Ron, "although the way you say it doesn't exactly fill me with confidence that that'll actually happen."

"I am serious, actually," Harry assured him. "Arthur, Molly, I was thinking I'd like to invite a couple of people for dinner sometime, but I wanted to make sure it was okay with you first."

"I'm sure it will be, dear," said Molly. "Who were you thinking of?"

"One is John, John Smith, he's the Muggle Studies teacher at Hogwarts," Harry explained.

"Oh, he's the really handsome one, right?" asked Molly.

Arthur raised an eyebrow, and Ron snickered. "So, what's Dad, a goblin by comparison?"

"Of course not," replied Molly, annoyed. "That was how Ginny described him, you know she has his class."

"Well, that was before I was with Harry," said Ginny. "Now, not only is Harry the most handsome man in the world, he is the only handsome man in the world, for my purposes. The best any other man can do would be to be considered 'all right.'"

Harry looked at her quizzically, both pleased and embarrassed; it seemed like an odd thing for her to say. Ron looked at Harry appraisingly. "Well, he's all right, I suppose, but—"

"Thank you, Ron," Harry interrupted.

"Any time, mate. But why—"

Now Hermione interrupted. "Do I have to explain everything to you, Ron?"

"Not if you're going to take that attitude," said Ron defensively. "But you might have to explain it to Harry, I don't think he gets it, either."

"You see, Harry," explained Hermione, "she's letting you know that she's not going to make comments to you about how handsome any other man is, and she expects you to do

the same, not to talk to her about how extremely attractive some woman is."

This had never occurred to Harry, but he supposed he could understand how it would make Ginny feel if he talked about how attractive some other woman was. He turned to Ginny and said, "Have I ever mentioned how totally beautiful you are, much more so than any other girl?"

Everyone smiled, including Ginny. "What about Cho?" she asked.

Feigning puzzlement, Harry instantly responded, "Cho who?"

Harry's friends all laughed. "Right answer, Harry," chuckled Hermione.

"He learns fast," added Pansy.

Harry's eyes were still on Ginny's, and hers were on his; he could tell that she appreciated his answers even though she knew he was joking. "So, why do you want to invite John over, especially?" she asked.

"You call him 'John'?" asked Arthur, surprised.

"He asks all his students to," explained Hermione. "I think it's just his personality, not anything to do with his being a Muggle especially."

"Anyway," Harry continued, addressing Arthur, "I like him, and thought during the year I'd like to get to know him better. Also, after last Christmas, when I told the teachers about the conversation we'd had about prisoners' rights, and of course what you said, he said you sounded like someone he'd like to get to know."

Molly smiled at her husband. "I like him better all the time."

Arthur returned her smile. "That sounds good, Harry. Who was the other person you were thinking of?"

"Archibald Dentus," said Harry, and he saw Arthur and Molly's eyebrows rise. "I see you know who he is."

"Oh, yes," Arthur nodded. "You don't get to be an undersecretary in the Ministry without everyone knowing who you are. I just didn't know you knew him well enough to invite him to dinner. I just knew that he was the one who came with Fudge to get you to support the ARA in March."

"He's been sort of keeping his eyes open for me at the Ministry, watching out for things he knows I'd be concerned about," Harry explained. "Not that you couldn't, of course, but—"

"Not like he can, I couldn't," interrupted Arthur. "I can tell you what rank-and-file people are saying; he can tell you what top-level people are saying, which is much more important. What made you decide you could trust him?"

"Partly the way he comes across, much more like a real person than any kind of politician. Also, Albus said he was a friend, and more or less said I could trust him. I think he kind of felt sorry for me getting thrown into politics when I knew nothing about it, and wanted to help me. He partly lets me know what's going on, and partly teaches me about politics. He knows I don't really want anything to do with it, and manages to teach me about it while not making it seem like a lecture. He's been very helpful."

"What's your impression of him, dear?" Molly asked her husband.

"He does more or less have a reputation as a straight shooter, or at least as much a one as you can be at that position," said Arthur. "Obviously you have to be somewhat good at politics and infighting to even get to where he was. I didn't have that strong an impression of him one way or another until he quit, which made my respect for him increase. Most people don't walk away from that sort of job because of principles."

"That's probably because most people with principles don't reach that position in the first place," said Molly. Looking at Harry, she added, "I'm not talking about Dentus specifically, Harry, since I don't know him. Maybe he's the exception. I've just seen too much of the Ministry through Arthur's eyes not to be jaded."

"From everything Archibald's said, I can understand that," agreed Harry. "He did mention you once, Arthur. He said you were 'a good man who would do the right thing.'"

Arthur smiled wryly. "I assume this was in the context of explaining why I'm still in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office."

Harry nodded, glad that Arthur didn't seem embarrassed about it. "He was explaining why it's hard for good people to rise in the Ministry. His impression was that you wouldn't want any part of the moral compromises necessary to advance."

"He's certainly right about that," agreed Arthur. "Just don't have a strong enough stomach, I suppose."

"I wouldn't want you any other way, dear," Molly assured him. "Well, you arrange it, Harry, let us know when, and we'll be ready. Oh, I don't want to forget to tell you, Professor McGonagall called in the fireplace a little while ago, while

you and Ginny were outside. I offered to go get you, but she knew I was cooking, and said it wasn't urgent. She asked me to have you call her back after dinner. She wanted to talk to you and Hermione."

"That's odd," said a puzzled Hermione. "Why the two of us? Could it be something to do with the fight with Voldemort a few weeks ago?"

"First thing that pops into my mind," said Ron, "is that we're looking at the next Head Boy and Girl. Why do you look so surprised, Hermione? It's not as though you aren't a lock for the job."

"Don't say that!" she admonished him.

"What, afraid I'll jinx it? I thought you didn't believe in superstitious jinxes," retorted Ron, obviously happy to have touched a nerve.

"I don't. Just don't say it. Besides, I'm not a lock. At this point, you could make an excellent case for giving it to Pansy."

"Me?" asked Pansy, surprised. "You must be kidding. Why would she pick me? My grades aren't exactly fantastic."

"As I told Harry last year, it's not only about grades and responsibility, it's about leadership. People know what you did for Harry last year, they know how hard it was. They really respect and admire you, I know that. I mean, one night in our dormitory, Parvati and Lavender were telling me how they couldn't believe what you did, that it was so amazing. Let's put it this way: if it were decided by a vote, you'd win."

"Well, it's not, so that's not important," responded Pansy. "I think you're wrong, Hermione, and that's not something I've

said very often. Tell you what." She reached into her purse, pulled out some gold coins, and put them on the table. "Five Galleons. If I'm made Head Girl, I give you five Galleons. If it's you, you give me five Galleons." She raised her eyebrows at Hermione and waited for an answer.

Harry and Ron chuckled at the uncomfortable position Pansy had put Hermione in. Harry knew that if Hermione declined the bet, she was more or less admitting that Pansy was right, and if she accepted it, she would probably lose. Looking unhappy, she thought for a few seconds, then said hesitantly, "Look, you know I don't approve of gambling..."

Hermione's five friends laughed, and Pansy put away her money. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I didn't mean to make you that uncomfortable," she said. "But you have to recognize reality. You could just say, 'I know I'm the logical choice, but I don't want to get my hopes up,' we would understand that. But if you say that you might not get it, you're just begging for people to argue with you."

"Harry, Neville, you're always telling us about the things the Aurors bet on," said Ron. "What would they give for odds on this?"

Harry looked at Neville, and both shook their heads; Harry decided to answer the question in case Neville might get in trouble with Hermione for answering. "I don't think they'd even take bets on it, the odds would be so high against anyone but Hermione. Someone might throw a few Galleons on a twenty-to-one longshot, but probably not. The funny thing is, in any other year, Pansy would be the obvious choice. Just not this year."

"Okay, let's talk about Head Boy, then," said Hermione, changing the subject. "Did you mean to say, Ron, that you

think Harry will be Head Boy?"

Ron shrugged. "If she called about making you Head Girl, then she's probably also decided to make Harry Head Boy. Of course, we thought it was unlikely because he's a teacher. But you never know, I suppose. Harry would obviously be a lock if he wasn't a teacher."

"Well, I would ask Harry what he thinks, but I'm not so mean as to make him give an opinion on his own chances—"

"Yeah, but unlike you, I'm hoping I don't get it," Harry interrupted. "I already have way more than enough to do. If she tries to give it to me, I'll do my best to talk her out of it."

"Well, anyway, Neville, you can handicap the Head Boy situation," Hermione suggested. "What do you think?"

Neville thought. "This one is harder, because of Harry being a teacher, so it's unpredictable. Just the kind of thing the Aurors like. I think that Ernie would be the favorite, at even money. I'd put Harry and Ron at four to one each, and I'd make Anthony and Justin longshots, maybe fifteen to one."

"Hadn't thought of Justin," said Pansy. "I can see it, though. But you are forgetting one person. What do you think that person's odds are, Harry?"

"Hard to say. Six to one, is my best guess. Maybe I can get McGonagall to tell me afterwards if she considered him."

"I don't think he's any less likely than me," said Ron. "Maybe five to one for each of us. I don't think McGonagall's forgotten first year, when he got those last ten points for us."

"You mean me?" Neville blurted out, then scoffed. "Yeah, right. I've got about as much chance as Blaise Zabini."

"Hmmm... he will be the only Slytherin seventh year boy, so it's always possible," joked Pansy.

"I kind of find myself hoping it's Ernie, if only because he wants it so much, and he's the only one who does," said Harry. "He'll be crushed if he doesn't get it."

"You don't want it, Ron?" asked Molly, surprised.

Ron shrugged. "If I get it, that's okay, but no, I guess I don't really care. I'm Quidditch captain, I'd rather be that than Head Boy anyway. Being Head Boy isn't going to get me all excited or anything."

No one said anything to that; Harry wondered if Ron was thinking of Percy, and if others were saying nothing for the same reason. The dinner concluded with only sporadic, casual conversation.

After dinner, Harry and Hermione walked over to the fireplace. They couldn't both put their heads in, of course, so they agreed that Harry would do it. He leaned in and shouted the name of the fireplace in McGonagall's quarters at Hogwarts.

"Hello, Harry, thank you," McGonagall said pleasantly. "I wondered if you and Hermione would come see me this evening, the earlier the better if you are free."

"Sure," Harry agreed. "How should we get there?"

"Normally, I would meet you at the Hogsmeade Owl Office and walk to the school with you, but as of now, security is an issue for both you and Hermione. I don't like to impose on Fawkes, but I'm sure you understand, and he does as well, that you're in danger every time you appear in public unguarded, even for a short time."

"I understand," said Harry. Humorously, he added, "I have a feeling he knew what he was getting into when he chose me. We'll be there in a minute." He exited the fireplace and told Hermione they would be using Fawkes.

"Did you ask her what it was about?" asked Hermione anxiously.

Harry shook his head. "I've dealt with her enough to know that if I asked, she'd say something like 'you'll find out when you get here.'"

"I guess so," agreed Hermione. "Well, I'm ready. Aren't you going to call Fawkes?"

Fawkes burst into view, his tail feathers sticking out. "I don't have to, really, it's just a matter of his being aware that I'm ready." He put an arm around Hermione and she one around him, and they both reached for Fawkes's tail. Fawkes lifted off, and instantly, they were in McGonagall's living quarters.

"Ah, thank you, Harry and Hermione, and thank you too, Fawkes," said McGonagall, addressing Fawkes politely. Fawkes settled on Harry's shoulder. "Please sit down," she said, gesturing them to the sofa. "Are you having good summers so far?"

"Yes, thank you, Professor," said Hermione politely. Harry could tell that she was eager for McGonagall to come to the point, though she would never press McGonagall.

"Mine's been really good," said Harry, with spontaneous enthusiasm. "Of course, my summers are usually terrible, so that may not be saying much. But I'm happy."

"Yes, I see that," said McGonagall with a very small smile. "Well, I should come to the point of why I asked you here.

Miss Granger, I have to believe it will not shock you to know that you have been appointed to the post of Head Girl for this year."

"Thank you, Professor," exhaled Hermione, who Harry felt was equally happy and relieved.

"Is it all right if I say 'we told you so' now?" asked Harry. She looked at him sourly as Harry explained the gist of their earlier conversation to McGonagall. She shook her head in mock disapproval.

"You do stand a risk of picking up the Aurors' bad habits," she said soberly. "So tell me, then, how was the Head Boy race handicapped?" Harry told her. "An astute analysis," offered McGonagall. "But Mr. Longbottom failed to include himself in the consideration. You may let him know, if you wish, that I could have appointed him to the post with no indecision or regret. But he is correct, I have chosen Mr. Macmillan for the position. I see you are not disappointed, Harry."

"More like relieved," agreed Harry. "Saves me an argument."

She favored him with a strict expression. "You will find that arguing with me is likely to be a fruitless endeavor. Now, as to why you are here... you are here in your capacity as a Hogwarts professor, not a student. There is a personnel matter on which I would appreciate your input." Harry glanced at Hermione; he was surprised she was being allowed to sit in on such a meeting. "The reason for Miss Granger's continued presence will become clear as we proceed, Professor," she said.

"I don't mind, obviously," clarified Harry. "Oh, but when you mentioned personnel, that reminded me... there was something Albus wanted me to tell you, that he told me last

night. Apparently, he's discovered recently that from where he is, he can... 'commune' is the word he uses, with ghosts. He can communicate with them with thoughts, not just words, like we can. He says communication is much faster and clearer than it is with us. Anyway, he talked about this for some time, but to jump to the end of the story, apparently Professor Binns has decided to move on to the spiritual realm. He won't be coming back."

McGonagall, looking frustrated, raised an eyebrow. "And Albus persuaded him to do this?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't agree with the word 'persuaded,'" said Harry. "More like, that Professor Binns and he talked, and Professor Binns realized some things. He said, 'please suggest to Minerva that she see this as a positive thing for Professor Binns, rather than as an annoyance to her.'"

"Easy for him to say," grunted McGonagall. "He's not the one who has to find a new History of Magic professor. Well, you can tell Albus that I am pleased for the sake of Professor Binns' immortal soul, but it does not help my situation any."

"You know, Professor, you can tell him yourself," explained Harry. "He's told me that all you, all anybody, whether living or dead, has to do is think of him in a focused way. Imagine that you're talking directly to him, and he'll notice, and hear you."

"Thank you, Harry. Yes, I do imagine I will have a thing or two to say to him. He didn't happen to make any suggestions that I would find helpful, did he?"

"This was the strange thing," said Harry. "He said that I would help you. I have no idea how; he said it would come to me. I was annoyed at him, too. He knew I was, of course, and he just smiled. I don't know how he can know that, since he

can't know the future, but..." Harry trailed off, and suddenly looked startled.

"What is it, Harry?" asked Hermione, concerned.

Harry shook his head. "It just came to me. I had a thought during dinner, something that popped into my head, and I forgot again because I was following the conversation. It's more like intuition, I guess. I was thinking about Archibald, you know, Archibald Dentus, and I suddenly had this thought, 'he'd make a good History of Magic teacher.' Like I said, it just went right out of my head again, but I'm sure that's what Albus was talking about. I probably would have suggested him eventually anyway, but I guess Albus was telling me it was a good idea."

McGonagall looked intrigued. "Is he qualified? Not just anyone can teach History of Magic, you know, former Ministry undersecretary or no."

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "That's the kind of thing you can find out more easily than I could, I imagine. Or, I could ask him at dinner, if he comes. I was planning to ask him and John over for dinner one night. I could ask him about history, find out what he knows, what he studied."

"An amusing notion, a sixteen-year-old conducting a job interview for a sixty-something-year-old. Do you think it's something he would want to do, or agree to do?"

"I don't know that either. It just seemed like a good idea. He's kind of retired right now, but maybe he'd agree to do it for a few years until we find someone else."

"Well, we shall consider him as a possibility, then," said McGonagall in conclusion. "I will make a few discreet

inquiries, perhaps I can dig up his school records from a half-century ago.

"Now, if I may move on, as I was saying, there was a personnel matter to be attended to. A few things will be changing now that I am the headmistress, and one of them is that I can no longer function as the Head of House for Gryffindor. I am certain you can see that it would be a conflict of interest for me to continue in that role."

"Yes, I can see that," agreed Harry. "So, who's going to be the new Head of House?"

"That is what I wanted your input on, Professor," said McGonagall. "I will go over the roster of teachers with you, and get your thoughts. Please keep in mind that it is very important that the Head of House be a teacher who was in that House as a student." Harry nodded; he had always understood that was the case.

"Firstly, we have Professors Snape, Flitwick, and Sprout, all heads of other houses. Proceeding down the roster in order of seniority, we have Professor Sinistra, whose house was Slytherin. Professor Svengard, the Study of Ancient Runes professor, was a Ravenclaw."

"Professor," interjected Hermione as McGonagall paused between sentences, taking care not to interrupt, "it's beginning to look like—"

McGonagall had no compunctions about interrupting Hermione. "Miss Granger, will you please hold your thoughts until the roster is completed?" Abashed, Hermione looked down and was silent. McGonagall continued. "Professor Vector, also a Ravenclaw..."

Now Harry spoke during a pause. "There are a lot of Ravenclaws, aren't there?"

McGonagall nodded. "This is often a problem. As Ravenclaw is the most academically oriented House, a greater-than-usual proportion of teachers will be from there. Continuing... Professor Trelawney, yet another Ravenclaw." Harry was relieved; he didn't want to think of her being a Head of House. "Next, we have John, who of course cannot be considered because he did not attend Hogwarts, is not magical, and belonged to no house. Next, we have Professor Hagrid."

"He was in Gryffindor, wasn't he?" Harry asked hopefully. McGonagall nodded. Thinking about how good it would be, Harry had a sudden realization. "Damn... it would be great, but he can't do it, can he. He wouldn't be able to enter the common room."

"Unfortunately, a necessary element of being a Head of House," confirmed McGonagall. "Who is next on the list... ah, yes, the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor." She looked up at Harry, a hint of amusement in her eyes. Harry glanced over at Hermione, who was smiling.

He suddenly realized what was happening. I don't believe this, he thought. He sighed, and thought for another minute; neither McGonagall nor Hermione spoke. Finally, he looked at McGonagall plaintively. "There's no other way?"

"If you can think of one, I am all ears," replied McGonagall.

"Obviously, you know there isn't," said Harry. "You knew this when you called this afternoon. Why didn't you just tell me straight out?"

McGonagall looked at him as if he were overlooking something obvious. "And what would your reaction have been? Just because arguing with me will be fruitless does not mean I want to encourage you to do it. I would have had to explain it to you this way anyway; I just chose to do it before the argument rather than after."

"And Hermione is here in case I didn't listen to you?"

McGonagall shrugged lightly. "She would not be here had I not had something to tell her as well, but I felt it was convenient. In any case... please keep in mind that being Head of House is a serious responsibility. You will be in charge of all students in your House, in a very important way. Should someone misbehave in a serious fashion, for example, the decision to expel or not expel them will rest with you."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," said Harry. "I still remember you and Albus threatening to expel me, in second year."

"If we are fortunate, no one will fly a car into Hogwarts this year," responded McGonagall. "But I will tell you a little secret. Our threats notwithstanding, there were no circumstances under which we would have actually expelled you." Obviously amused at Harry's surprised expression, she continued, "Despite not knowing for certain whether Voldemort would return, we knew it was highly likely that you would play an important role in future events, so your not becoming a fully trained wizard was simply not an option. At the same time, it was necessary to impress on you in the strongest possible terms that flying a car onto the Hogwarts grounds was unacceptable. So, we... fibbed a little."

Harry smiled. "I guess I can understand that, from your point of view. But the funny thing is, I don't think it would have made that much difference. Generally, I didn't break the rules just for the heck of it, but because there was a really good reason. Maybe Ron and I didn't actually need to fly the car to Hogwarts, but we thought we did."

"A really good reason?" asked Hermione. "What about Hogsmeade, third year?"

Somewhat chagrined, Harry replied, "Well, I did say, 'generally.'" He explained to McGonagall what he had done; she shook her head in disbelief.

"So, you knew, or rather, thought, that there was a madman on the loose who wanted nothing better than to kill you, but you snuck into Hogsmeade anyway, putting yourself at great risk. If that did not dissuade you from taking such chances, it's not surprising that our threats did not. In any case, it will now be your job to make sure that no Gryffindor students behave anywhere near as foolishly and rashly as you did. Do you think you can do that?"

"I don't see myself as much of a disciplinarian," he admitted. "Maybe I'll just try to reason with them. Of course, then they'll probably just say, 'yes, but you did it before.' If they know about all the stuff I did, that is. The younger ones might not know."

"They know," said Hermione confidently. "Pansy told me this in the notebooks in March. Apparently one consequence of the first years liking you so much was that they went around the school asking everybody, even seventh years they didn't know, what they knew about what you had done. I'm pretty sure that by now, they know everything that was known by anyone outside the six of us."

"Well, with any luck, I won't have to threaten anyone," Harry said hopefully. "I have a feeling our Head Girl will keep them in line."

"Sure, now that it benefits you that I like to follow the rules..." She turned to McGonagall. "I wish I had a Galleon for every time he broke the rules after I told him not to."

"A few of those were your idea," Harry pointed out. "The Polyjuice Potion, for example—"

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione, giving him a wounded and accusatory look.

"I don't think we're going to get in trouble for it, it's been four and a half years. Besides, you told her about me going into Hogsmeade." He then explained to a very curious McGonagall what had happened.

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Very impressive, for a second year; many N.E.W.T. students have trouble with that. Well then, Hermione, I suppose I need not tell you to look in on Moaning Myrtle's restroom every now and then to check for rule-breaking. Then again, perhaps I will mention that to Albus tonight... perhaps he can 'commune' with her as well, and we can get that restroom back in service."

"He'll probably say that you're not looking at it from a very spiritual point of view," joked Harry.

"Yes, well, I will be happy to leave the spiritual considerations to him," agreed McGonagall. "Now, getting back to your new position, there are a few other things you should think about. One is that fifth-year prefects must be chosen; I will want your recommendations no later than the end of July. Another is that you now have ultimate responsibility for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Ironically,

though you report to Mr. Weasley as captain, he will now report to you as Head of House. You have the authority to make any decision involving the team, including choosing players. I have tended to leave such decisions to the captain; for the sake of convenience, not to mention your friendship with Mr. Weasley, I would advise you to do the same.

"There is another Quidditch-related matter which should be brought to your attention. You will recall that at the beginning of your second year, Lucius Malfoy provided seven top-of-the-line brooms to the Slytherin Quidditch team. Professors Sprout, Flitwick, and myself all protested this rather loudly, feeling that it would give Slytherin an unfair advantage. Professor Snape responded that the principle was no different than my providing you with a Nimbus 2000 in your first year, and Professor Dumbledore agreed with him and took no action. I admit that I ceased protesting when you were given the Firebolt, but Professors Flitwick and Sprout have continued to formally request, at the beginning of each school year, that privately owned brooms be disallowed for use in Quidditch, and that school-owned brooms be distributed equally among all four teams. Professor Dumbledore's response has been that all four Heads of House must agree, and of course, Professor Snape never has. Professors Flitwick and Sprout yesterday renewed their request, pointing out that the Gryffindor team will be using two Firebolts this year. They did, you should know, ask me to mention to you that their request has no connection to their personal affection for you. In any case, though it is quite unlikely that Professor Snape's attitude will change, you must decide on your stance, as you now represent Gryffindor House."

Harry hadn't imagined that he would ever have to make this kind of decision. "Ron would go crazy if I agreed," he said,

half to himself. "I know I can't let that decide it for me, of course. Well, okay, I'll think about it. Is there anything else I should know, or think about, right now?"

She reached over to an end table near her for a small book, which she handed to Harry. The cover read, simply, 'Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: The Complete School Rules.' "Read that carefully; you should be able to quote from it by the time you are finished."

Harry thought to respond, "No need, I can ask Hermione if I need to know anything," but held back at the last second, realizing a long and serious lecture would be forthcoming at such an attempt at humor. Instead, he nodded and said nothing. "Don't worry, Professor, I'll quiz him on it," said Hermione.

"Unfortunately, she's not joking," added Harry.

"Excellent. Another good reason to have her here," said McGonagall. "Well, I will let you two get back to the Burrow, unless either of you has any questions."

"I just wanted to say, Professor, how honored I am that you chose me, and you know I'll do the very best job I can," said Hermione exuberantly.

"Well, I would be honored that you chose me," said Harry, "if it weren't for the fact that there was no other choice, and that it wasn't something I wanted, and—"

"Yes, thank you, Harry," interrupted McGonagall, looking annoyed. "It should please you to know that you are not alone in feeling put upon by unsought duties; Deputy Headmaster Snape has had a few sarcastic comments as well. He is finding the assembling of the schedule even more unpleasant than I did."

"Great, I'll probably have two twelve-hour days," said Harry.
"Better him than me, though."

"He said something similar, actually," said McGonagall.
"What was it exactly... 'I will be doubly pleased when the Dark Lord is defeated, for I will derive great pleasure in handing over this mess to Professor Potter.'"

"I haven't said I would stay on," protested Harry.

"It appears that he assumes that you will," she observed, giving him a look he had often seen from Hermione, suggesting that she knew more than he did. "Oh, and that reminds me, there is another thing for you to consider. Now that you will be teaching N.E.W.T. classes, you must decide what O.W.L. score you will require of students who wish to join your N.E.W.T. class."

"I don't have to think about that," he replied quickly.
"Anybody can join, even if they failed their O.W.L."

"Are you sure? There are reasons for having such standards."

"I know, but I really see this as something that's essential," he argued, suddenly more animated than he'd been all evening. "I know that not everybody will end up having to use it, but especially considering the situation these days, I'd hate to say no to someone, then have them suffer for it later on. If somebody's having trouble, I'll just try to help them as best I can."

"Well," said McGonagall, "I am glad to see that you have a passion for teaching, even if you do not for being a Head of House."

Harry had a sudden thought. "Let me ask you, what were Albus's standards for the class last year?"

"As you obviously suspect, the same as yours," she conceded.

"There you are," he concluded, pleased to have it confirmed that he had made the right choice. "Okay, we'll be getting back, I guess. Oh, and Professor... I may not be thrilled, but I will do the best I can."

She nodded understandingly. "As do we all, Harry. Have a good evening, both of you." They said their goodbyes, and as he reached for Fawkes's tail Harry wondered how he would handle being Head of House. Just when I get used to one thing, he thought, another gets shoved in my lap.

* * * * *

The next day was completely free for Harry, as it was Tuesday, and his summer training days with the Aurors were Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. In the morning, Pansy, Hermione, and Ginny went to Diagon Alley to look around, while Harry and Ron stayed around the Burrow. They played some chess, then practiced dueling, which they found they did a lot when they had time. Ron had joked to Harry that he now knew how Harry felt when they played chess, as Ron couldn't come near defeating Harry at dueling. Harry was happy to practice with Ron anyway, though; if Ron's grasp of tactics in dueling became as good as those he used in chess, Harry could still learn from dueling with him, even if Harry's strength was overpowering.

After the girls returned, they had lunch. Harry sat with Ginny in the living room, greatly enjoying the idea that he had nothing to do. He knew that he should make no such comment to Hermione, since she would suggest that he start on the rulebook. He did intend to study it, but he felt he deserved at least another week of relative leisure first.

Molly announced that she was going out shopping, and Hermione decided to go with her. After they left, Ginny leaned into Harry and whispered, "Why don't you call Fawkes, we can take a little trip."

He raised his eyebrows. "I thought we were going to talk to Molly about that first."

"It's okay," she said. "I'll explain when we get there."

Fawkes suddenly appeared, and Pansy walked in. Seeing Fawkes, she smiled at them. "Have fun, you two," she said teasingly.

"I think we will," said Ginny, smiling. They grabbed Fawkes's tail, and were suddenly in the bedroom of Dumbledore's former living quarters, now officially Harry's. They sat on the bed and kissed, which they did a lot, especially when they were alone.

"So, what about Molly?" asked Harry.

"Well, I hope you won't be unhappy that I did this, but I had the talk with her by myself," explained Ginny, checking his face for a reaction. He just nodded, letting her know he wasn't bothered. "I figured you wouldn't exactly be upset. Funny, you can talk about love easily, no problem, but you still get all embarrassed about sex." She smiled as she noticed him react with discomfort at her use of the word.

"Give me some time, I just have to get used to it," said Harry. "I'm glad that both of us aren't embarrassed about it. So, what did she say?"

"It just sort of came up naturally, so I decided to talk to her about it. Like I kind of expected, she had a mixed reaction. On the one hand, she loves that we're together, and knows

that we're going to want to do some sexual things; she's not bothered by that. She even said, 'If your father and I'd had a phoenix and a private place to go, at your age...' She didn't finish the sentence, but it was obvious what she meant. And she knows that since we had the Joining of Hands done, we're committed. Basically, she'd have no problem with us doing anything we wanted, except for my age. I'm two months away from sixteen, so it's hard for her to just say she approves of our going off together and doing whatever we feel like."

"I suppose I can understand that," he said. "I wouldn't know, but I'd have to imagine that she's being more understanding about it than most parents would be, especially parents of a fifteen-year-old."

"Yeah, but it's mostly because it's you," Ginny pointed out. "If it was anyone else, I'm sure she'd be reacting like I assume most mothers would... 'not until you're seventeen,' that sort of thing. And since we're committed, you could say it doesn't really matter whether we do something now, or in two months, or when I'm seventeen. So anyway, the way we left it was like this: she knows we're going to come here sometimes, but she wants us to either let her know, or if she isn't around, make sure someone at home knows. It's understandable that she doesn't want to come home and have no idea where we are, of course. And she knows she can have one of the others call us on our pendants if she really wants to. She said she'll do that if we go off and forget to tell anyone."

"But as for what we do when we're here... she basically accepts the idea that she can't control that, and she's not even sure she'd want to. She leaves it to our judgment, what we're comfortable with. Her bottom line was, 'whatever you do, don't get pregnant,' which obviously I had no intention

of doing anyway. So, if we decide we want to... do everything, I have to go to St. Mungo's first."

His eyebrows narrowed in puzzlement. "Why?"

"There's a spell you can have done there," she explained. "It's a spell that prevents pregnancy, and it can be done so it lasts anywhere from a month to a year. It's simple, quick, and safe; lots of witches go there every year to get it updated. I was thinking I'd go do it even if we don't make a particular decision, just so it's not a danger that we get carried away and do something we end up regretting. I've heard that once you get started in that direction, it can be hard to stop." She grinned and touched his cheek; he leaned in and they kissed again.

"I can believe that," he said. "Just kissing makes me feel that way. But then, of course, there's the other aspect of our situation, the one Molly doesn't know about."

Nodding somberly, Ginny moved over to the center of the bed and lay down. She pulled Harry over so he lay next to her. They kissed briefly, and he stroked her hair. As he did, she spoke again. "You saw how Pansy smiled at us when we left. As far as she's concerned, we can go here and be carefree, do what we want. It would be so nice if that were true." Seeing his expression, she added, "And don't worry, I don't blame you. It's not like this was your idea. So, how do you think we're going to do this?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "All I know is, I really want to do stuff with you." Embarrassment at what he was about to say made him pause, but he knew that she wanted him to show more enthusiasm; he felt it, but had a hard time verbalizing it, and conveying it with actions was difficult as well, given

the circumstances. He plowed ahead. "If it wasn't for... the situation, I'd be working on getting your clothes off."

He felt himself flush as he said it, but her delighted grin made him feel better. "If it wasn't for the situation," she assured him, "my clothes would already be off, and so would yours. I'd have attacked you as soon as we got here."

He grinned broadly, now flush with pleasure. He understood why she was frustrated with his shyness, since her enthusiasm felt so good. His grin faded, however, as he focused on the reality of their situation. "Well, good as that sounds, maybe the thing to do is treat it like going into a cold swimming pool, from the shallow end. Put a foot in, then a little more, get accustomed to it. That sort of thing. What do you think?"

She nodded. "It makes sense." Smiling a little, she added, "No point in just sitting here talking, since we can do that at the Burrow." She leaned over to kiss him, and as the kiss continued, he couldn't help thinking how much more comfortable this was than the couples' places at Hogwarts. After another minute, he felt her hand moving around inside his robes, and he felt his do the same with her reflexively, almost without his conscious thought. He wondered how far into the water they would go.

Two hours later, they let go of Fawkes as he appeared in the living room of the Burrow. The room's only occupant was Hermione, who was reading a large, thick book, which she put down when she saw them. Her expression was a mix of pleasure and sympathy. "I find myself wanting to ask 'how did it go,' but I know I shouldn't."

Ginny nodded. "I can see why. Don't worry, I know you don't want to hear details any more than we'll want to tell you. I

guess the answer is, as well as can be expected, considering. We know it may take some time."

"I really do feel for both of you, you know," said Hermione. "When Molly and I got back, she asked where you were, and Pansy told us. They were smiling, especially Pansy, you know, in this nudge-nudge kind of way. I know how they think it is for you, and I know how it really is. I do think you'll get past it, though," she added, obviously trying to be encouraging.

Harry appreciated her support. "We think so, too. Albus says it's just a matter of changing how we think. I'm sure he's right, but it's easier said than done. It's still really nice to be alone, though, in comfortable surroundings. It'll seem strange to go back to the couples' places in September."

"Will we have to?" wondered Ginny. "Couldn't we just go to your office, and then take Fawkes to your quarters?"

"That has to be against all kinds of rules, doesn't it? Hermione?"

"Go look it up," she urged him. "You've got the rule book, you need to start learning it anyway. What better time than when you actually want to know something?"

He sighed. "I was hoping to wait a week before I even looked at it, give myself a break. All right, I'll go get it."

He headed up the stairs, noticing how much firmer and more comfortable they felt since the Weasleys had them reconstructed as part of the work done on the house to make it more secure. He walked to Ron's bedroom, or what seemed more like the boys' dormitory now, grasped the handle, and found it locked. He turned it in surprise, figuring Ron had made a mistake.

"Ron!" he shouted through the door. "The door's locked."

Harry thought he heard a sigh from the other side. "Brilliant observation, Harry," Ron shouted back. "Now, go away."

Another voice came through the door. "Hi, Harry," shouted Pansy cheerfully.

All right!, thought Harry. Laughing, he said, "Maybe I should come back later."

Through the door, Harry heard Ron say, in a normal tone, "That's our Harry, nothing gets by him. Mind like a steel trap."

Still chuckling, Harry headed back down the stairs. Sitting down on the sofa next to Ginny, he said, "There seems to be a problem with getting the rule book right now."

"Yes, I knew that, of course," said Hermione. "That was just my way of letting you know what was going on."

Harry laughed again. "I'm sure Ron would be thrilled to hear that."

"Well, let's not mention that to him, no need to aggravate him. Besides, it didn't seem right, you being the last to know."

"But I was, anyway, right?"

"No, Neville doesn't know yet," said Hermione. "I'll have to tell him, or he'll never find out, since Ron'll never tell him." She paused. "I hope they work out."

"You think they might not?" asked Harry, surprised.

Hermione shrugged. "I'm just a little worried," she explained. "Pansy's kind of sensitive about some things, and Ron's kind of..."

"Insensitive?" suggested Ginny.

Hermione nodded. "Like, if he brings up her past once, in a critical way, then that's it, they're done."

"He wouldn't be so stupid," Harry asserted. "No way."

Ginny's face took on a 'well, maybe' expression. "We hope you're right, but people are bound to get in fights, and often they look for hurtful things, not even consciously. It could be out of his mouth before he knows it."

"Remember fifth year, Harry, when we asked you about those dreams, and you made that nasty crack about Ron's skills as a Keeper? That really hurt him," Hermione reminded him. "You weren't thinking about that, you just wanted us off your back. That's a good example of how that can happen."

"That was a really hard time for me," said Harry defensively. "But I suppose I see your point, he could be having a hard time at some point. She couldn't forgive him if he blurted it out, just once?"

Hermione looked doubtful. "You know how fragile her ego is, Harry. It's gotten better lately, probably partly because of our support and the support the school gave her after Easter, but... it's like she's trying to build a new self-image. One comment like that from someone she cares about, and it could fall apart, at least for a while. She just might not be in any condition to forgive him. It's hard to know."

"Well, let's hope it doesn't happen," said Ginny. "Oh, Harry, while you were upstairs, Hermione came up with a good idea

for helping us with our little problem."

Hermione gave Ginny an annoyed glance. "I was just kidding, Ginny."

"I thought it wasn't a bad idea," responded Ginny. To Harry, she continued, "She said she should do Memory Charms on both of us so we'd forget about the thing with Snape, then we'd go off to your Hogwarts quarters blissfully ignorant and do what we wanted. Then she'd remove the charm when we got back, and that would be that. There'd be no reason for us to worry after that, because it would be out there, so to speak."

Harry chuckled as he listened. "I can see the appeal of it," he agreed. "But can you do... of course you can, sorry, Hermione, I forgot who I was talking to."

"I know how to do them, but that's not the same as being able to, since I've never done it before, obviously," she explained. "I wouldn't want to try it out on you two. You can do them now, can't you, Harry?"

"Yeah, the Aurors taught Neville and I, since it's a pretty basic thing for an Auror. A few Aurors volunteered to let us practice on them. Simple things first, like you tell them a number and make them forget it, moving up to more complicated things. Obviously, we got a big lecture about only using it in one's capacity of being an Auror, and not, for example, use it on you so you'd forget about that time I snuck into Hogsmeade, and wouldn't be able to tell McGonagall about it."

"Well, you told her about the Polyjuice Potion," she countered.

"You did yours first, so I thought it was all right. Anyway, she was disappointed with what I did, but impressed with what you did."

"It must be that I break the rules more virtuously than you do," she said in a deliberately superior tone.

"Must be," Harry said, pretending to concede the argument. Anyway—" He stopped speaking as his pendant started to vibrate in a particular pattern. It had been set up to vibrate rather than blink so that others wouldn't know that someone was calling Harry if he was in a position where he would have to explain. He held the pendant up and spoke into it. "Hello, Professor. I'll be there in a few minutes." He shrugged at Ginny and Hermione. "Should I go outside, or—"

"No, it's okay, we'll go into the kitchen," said Hermione. They knew that he always took a few minutes to focus on love and get into the proper state of mind before seeing Snape, and it was better for him to be alone to do it. Ginny walked over and gave him an energetic kiss. Breaking off, she touched his face and said, "That ought to help you get into a loving frame of mind."

"It actually gets me into the frame of mind I was in for most of the last few hours," Harry said with a smile. "But I'm not complaining." Ginny and Hermione went into the kitchen, and Harry closed his eyes and concentrated.

Harry walked into Snape's office. "Hello, Professor," he said as he sat down in his now-usual chair. He had decided he wanted to try to chat with Snape a little before they got started; it seemed too strange to simply sit down without a word and have Snape begin viewing memories. Harry had discovered that Snape seemed not to particularly welcome the conversation, but apparently tolerated it as something

that made Harry more comfortable. "Professor McGonagall tells me that you're having trouble with making the schedule."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "If those were her exact words, then she was mistaken."

Harry thought back to last night. "Oh, yes, that's not exactly right. She said you found it even more unpleasant than she did, and looked forward to shoving it into my lap in the future."

"Yes, that is correct," agreed Snape casually. "You are now nearly of age, so I see no reason why you should not adopt some serious responsibilities."

Harry laughed, wondering if Snape was actually trying to make him laugh, or if it was just Snape's extremely dry humor. "And you said your sense of humor wouldn't be to most people's taste," he said. "I guess it's the needs of my schedule that's making it so annoying for you."

"Again, correct. I actually attempted to persuade the headmistress to require you to perform the task this year, since you will need practice for the years ahead. Unfortunately, she denied my request."

Harry chuckled to himself and shook his head. Amazing, he thought, how Snape would try to make me do that, even though I'm already doing what I'm doing for him. And to say it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He decided to respond in kind. "Well, don't worry... I've had a wonderful summer so far, but the way my life goes, something's bound to come along and mess it up. If it wasn't this, it'll be something else."

Snape looked at him in annoyance. "It is deliberately, I assume, that you misunderstand my intent. It is not to 'mess up your summer' per se, but to have you do a job that should by all rights be yours to do. The job would not be mine were it not for the practical requirements of the situation; I did not seek it or welcome it. Having to do this sort of extremely tedious duty as well is adding insult to injury. I assure you that had I a conscience, it would not be disturbed had my request been granted."

Harry was surprised to hear Snape say that. "You don't feel you have a conscience?"

Snape sighed in irritation. "As Miss Granger is fond of saying to you, Professor, *think*. I thought the headmaster explained this to you. The Dark Lord would not be well served by a servant who had a conscience. I did have one at one point, though it was, shall we say, underused. It now rests with the Severus Snape with whom you converse at night."

That makes sense, Harry thought. "Yes, I suppose I should have seen that," he agreed. "I guess Hermione's right, thinking isn't one of my strong points."

Snape looked as if he were making a great effort to restrain a natural impulse. "Several dozen acerbic comments leap to mind, but I shall set them aside for the time being. Shall we begin?" Harry nodded and started focusing on love again as Snape cast Legilimens.

The sessions tended to last about an hour, and this one did as well. When Snape was finished, he said, "This is rather a different experience than it was with the headmaster. With him, I was almost always viewing events from some time ago, with which I had no connection. In this situation, I find blanks are being consistently filled in. For example, I knew

boomslang skin had been stolen from my stores-though I thought you, not Miss Granger, were the culprit-but I did not know why. It would never have occurred to me that a second year could have managed to make Polyjuice Potion. Yet, ironically, all that effort and skill were used to a foolish end; Draco Malfoy was no more logical a suspect as the Heir of Slytherin than any other Slytherin student. Only your antagonism toward him caused you to suspect him, and you wasted a great deal of effort in pursuing a dead end."

"Well, we were twelve years old," Harry pointed out. "I'm sure we would do better now."

"If we are fortunate, the only mystery to be solved this year will be that of how to defeat the Dark Lord. And sad to say, 'thinking' deficit or no, I suspect that responsibility will be yours, and yours alone." Snape looked quite displeased at the prospect.

"Maybe," replied Harry, "but I have a feeling that when that happens, it's not going to be from thinking. It'll probably just come to me, like that spell did last September. I don't know why I feel that way, I just do."

"I find that would not surprise me at all," agreed Snape. "In any case, I shall detain you no longer, Professor." Harry nodded and left Snape's office.

Fawkes deposited Harry in the Burrow's living room; Harry thanked Fawkes, who disappeared again. Hermione and Ginny were on the sofa. "Well, this time I can ask, how did it go?" asked Hermione.

"About as usual," Harry answered. "He's up to the end of the second year now. And while he didn't say it quite the same way as McGonagall did, he was also impressed that you managed to make Polyjuice Potion at that age."

Hermione's eyebrows went up a little. "I suppose that's as close to a compliment as I'll ever get from him."

"How does he view the memories, Harry?" wondered Ginny. "I thought you said that they came as kind of flashes of a scene. How can he see them long enough to get any information?"

"I asked him about that in the second session," answered Harry. "Apparently it's a skill you can refine and develop; it's like, you see a memory and you kind of grab it and hang onto it. Obviously, he's had tons of practice, so it's second nature to him by now. I could probably develop the skill if I wanted to, but it's really not going to be that useful most of the time. The other person has to be willing to let you view the memory, obviously."

"You could try it when we practice, you know," offered Hermione. "I wouldn't mind. In fact, we should practice this afternoon, we haven't for a few days."

"Yes, I suppose we should," he agreed. Looking at Ginny, he added, "I guess I've let some other things distract me."

Ginny and Hermione smiled. "You're enjoying your summer for a change, nobody's going to blame you for that," said Hermione.

Ginny stood and walked up to him. "I'd be happy to distract you some more," she said with a familiar gleam in her eyes. As she kissed him, there was a small explosion in the fireplace, and Molly walked out, carrying a shopping bag.

"Hello, everyone," she said as she walked past them to the kitchen. "Don't mind me, you two, just go on ahead." Harry and Ginny exchanged a smile and another kiss before sitting back down.

"Very nice that she doesn't mind that," commented Ginny. "In fact, Hermione, it's nice that you don't mind, either. I know we can get kind of obnoxious at times. Okay, maybe just me, Harry doesn't usually do that if there are other people around."

"Well, he's had a hard life, he deserves it," said Hermione; Harry wasn't sure whether she was joking or not. "Actually, sometimes I kind of wish I were more like you, more... forward, I guess. I mean, I am a little bit; Neville and I never would have gotten started if I hadn't been, and I'm still more forward than him. Come to think of it, if I was with him like you are with Harry, he might be intimidated, so maybe it's just as well. Harry might not do it himself, but he isn't embarrassed when you do it."

"More like, very happy," agreed Harry. "But I'd probably be embarrassed if it was in front of anyone outside our group."

"Well, I wouldn't do it then, of course," said Ginny.

"Anyway," continued Hermione, "it's nice. I know everyone's different, though."

Ron and Pansy came into the room, just having come down the stairs. Harry looked at them, saying nothing but grinning broadly. "All right," said Ron, pretending to be annoyed, "you can wipe that smile off your face."

"I don't see why I should," Harry protested, deciding to annoy Ron further. "I'm really happy for you. C'mere, give me a hug."

"Uh, no thanks," said Ron, trying to give the impression of being disturbed by Harry's offer. "You can hug Pansy if you want."

Smiling, Pansy walked over and hugged him. "Thank you, Harry," she said happily. "I'm glad you're happy for us, anyway."

"I really am," he said quietly, letting her go.

She looked at him with appreciation. "I know."

Hermione stood and faced Harry. "Do you want to get started on the Legilimency?" she asked.

"Yeah, okay," he agreed. As they went upstairs to the girls' room, he commented, "I'll have to ask Pansy later on what happened, how they got together. I know Ron won't want to tell me."

"Well, I can tell you if you want," she offered. "Pansy told Ginny and me all this last night. It happened yesterday, while you and Neville were with the Aurors. On days you're with them, sometimes Ginny and I went out of our way to do things together, so Ron and Pansy could be alone if they wanted to." They entered the room and sat on beds opposite each other. "I think it was just a matter of Ron getting up enough nerve to make things clear to Pansy. She felt like it was up to him, since she felt she'd made her feelings pretty clear. Molly was gone, Ginny and I were upstairs, and Ron and Pansy were downstairs, on the sofa. Somehow the topic of you and Ginny came up, and Pansy made some admiring comment about how you told Ginny you were in love with her. Ron said he didn't think he could ever do that. Pansy asked him how he would do it, then. She told us later that at that point they just looked at each other, and it was as though they both knew that it was finally going to happen, like it was in both their eyes. Anyway, he just said, 'I suppose, like this,' and leaned over and kissed her."

Harry noticed that they were both smiling broadly. "That's a nice story," he said.

She nodded. "We were all excited when she told us. We were laughing, giggling, making jokes... mostly at Ron's expense, of course, Ginny and I... it was like a girls' slumber party, it was really nice."

"Sounds like it," agreed Harry. "Oh, before we get started, I wanted to ask you when we were going to start having you do Legilimency too."

"Me?" asked Hermione, her face registering her surprise. "Since when was I going to do Legilimency too?"

"I don't know, I guess I just assumed it," said Harry. "I should practice being on the receiving end of this. I know I should be pretty good at Occlumency by now, but I want to practice in this kind of situation. What if Voldemort someday tries to start yanking my memories out, like the one of the prophecy, or my relationship with Professor Snape?"

"I thought you just said before that that couldn't be done without the other person's permission," she pointed out.

"Sorry, I didn't say it quite right. I meant that the person it's being done to could always fight off the intruder, or at least try. But someone like Voldemort could probably overpower someone's defenses."

"Don't you have to kind of know what you're looking for?" she asked.

"Sort of," he agreed, "but not always, exactly. For example, when I practice with you, I focus on bringing up feelings of love, or friendship, like that. But you can also try to bring up feelings of shame, or secrecy. Apparently, Voldemort's really

good at it; Albus told me he used it a lot when he started getting powerful, to subvert people. He'd get close to a politician, some person with an important position, and do that to them. A lot of people had secrets embarrassing enough that Voldemort could blackmail them with it, and they'd do what he wanted, get him information, even if they didn't want to. In the rare event that they didn't have embarrassing secrets, he'd just kill them, or if he thought they might still be of use to him, do a Memory Charm on them. Anyway, he's very skilled at it. Whatever your darkest secret is, he'll find it pretty fast."

"Then when we had the confrontation with him, why didn't he... oh, that's right, he thought he'd be able to deal with us at his leisure."

Harry nodded. "He might not have tried it against me casually because he knew I'd gotten pretty good at Occlumency, and would want to get me defenseless and wandless before bothering to try. Now, fortunately, pulling out someone's secrets like that isn't something that's done a lot, because the other person knows that you've done it, and as I said, will probably try to fight you off. You can't just sneak up behind someone, do it, and they never know. So, most of the time it's not going to be an issue. But you can understand why I'd want to try to get as good at defending against this as possible. I suppose I also assumed that you'd want to learn Legilimency."

"I do, of course... but do you know enough to teach me?"

"I remember what Albus told me pretty well, so I can tell you... I figure between that and whatever books you can find on the subject, you can learn it just fine. Also, I can still ask him about some things if I want."

"That's true," she said. "It's easy for those of us who don't talk to him at night to forget that. But wouldn't it be better for you to practice this kind of defense against Professor Snape? He can give you much more of a challenge."

"Yes, but I can't do it with him nearly as often as with you. I know you, you'll get good pretty fast. I'm not worried that you won't be able to give me a challenge."

"Well, now I have an incentive to get good at it, to justify your confidence. After we're done here, I'll go to Hogwarts and get a few books out of the library."

"How were you going to get there?" he asked.

"The Owl Office fireplace, of course. Why?"

He shook his head. "No, use Fawkes. You and I are both high-priority targets for Voldemort; neither of us should be out alone in public, undefended. Pansy, too. She's not a target from a tactical point of view, but I consider her the same way."

She nodded. "I suppose you're right. I'm just not used to thinking of myself as a target, even though that's the whole reason I'm here. This isn't going to be a bother for Fawkes, us using him for transportation so often?"

"No, he's made that pretty clear to me, in his own way. All he needs to know is that I see it as necessary. He really doesn't mind."

"Okay, then, there should be some more time before dinner after we're done, enough for me to take Fawkes to the library and back, and get a few books. I can start reading them tonight. Want to get started?"

They practiced for an hour, after which Hermione went to the library, and Harry went downstairs to relax and talk with Ginny, Ron, and Pansy. After talking for a while, at Ginny's suggestion, all four went outside to watch the sunset.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 2, Teddy and Anna: Harry's pleasant, relaxed summer comes to an abrupt halt.

From Chapter 2: Kingsley appeared torn. "I'm not thrilled at the idea of using sixteen-year-olds in combat situations."

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Teddy and Anna

Three days later, Harry stood with Arthur and Ginny in the living room, waiting for their dinner guests to appear in the fireplace. John was first, coming a minute before six, followed by Dentus a few minutes later. Introductions were made, and the five stood and chatted until dinner was ready; at the table, Dentus was introduced to Harry's friends. John already knew everyone else, though he had never formally met Molly, Ron, Neville, or Pansy.

The conversation started out on Muggle-related topics, the main participants being Arthur and John. Watching them talk, it was clear to Harry that they could talk for hours on the topic. John talked for some time about current events in the Muggle world, and in a passing reference, found that he had to explain to almost everyone present what the internet was, as only Hermione was very familiar with it. Harry had heard the word mentioned at the Dursleys', but he had never been allowed near Dudley's computer, and had no particular interest in it in any case.

"Well, thanks for that explanation, John," said Arthur. "I had a general sense of what it was, but now I feel like I really understand it. Most people I talk to haven't mentioned it, but a few are pretty concerned. Archibald, I don't suppose that this has been any kind of concern at high levels?"

Dentus shook his head. "Not that I've heard. Of course, as you know only too well, the top leadership tends to dismiss anything to do with the Muggle world unless it's of vital,

immediate importance, like when they tried to get the Muggles to help them find Sirius Black a few years ago. But, no, I've heard nothing. I'd bet dozens of Galleons that nobody high up in the leadership has even heard of the internet, never mind understand what it is, and why it could be a problem."

"Why could it be a problem?" asked Ginny.

"It's not a real problem, not now," explained John, "but it has the potential to be a big problem as time goes by; one that could sneak up on us and then suddenly explode, and threaten the secrecy of the wizarding world. Of course, wizards have always tended to use Memory Charms to keep knowledge of the wizarding world away from Muggles. Obviously, as we all know, there have been times throughout history where that wasn't done as well as it should have been, and so you have this mythology in the Muggle world about witches and wizards—well, what they think is mythology, anyway—in which they get some things right, like that wizards ride on brooms and do spells, but they get a lot of things wrong.

"Now, there's never really been a danger of a large-scale exposure of the wizarding world to Muggles... until now. Books have protections in case they fall into Muggle hands, but the internet doesn't. If enough information gets put there, it could get out to the Muggle population at some point."

"But would Muggles believe it anyway?" asked Arthur. "My experience with Muggles is that most believe magic is a load of rubbish, or tricks designed to amuse children."

"Most wouldn't," agreed John. "The danger is in the long term. What's happening right now is that some of the few

witches and wizards who are interested in the Muggle world, or who have one foot in it, are talking about wizarding affairs on the internet. It's no more than a few dozen, and they're all connected. In what seems to me to be a weak attempt to preserve wizarding secrecy, they portray it all as if it were fiction, a make-believe world. This is not unheard-of, of course; in the Muggle world, people do form groups based around fictional or ancient historical ideas, and participate and interact as though it were real. Most Muggles think it's peculiar but harmless, and shrug and ignore it. They will with this, too; no Muggle will read this and think it's real. But what if this continues for some time? More wizards might start doing it; it could start to become popular with Muggles. They could join in, thinking it was fiction, or just read it and enjoy it as fiction. But then the danger is, if something happened, some significant event that affected the Muggle world... normally the Muggle governments would give some false cover story, and people would believe it, or maybe it would end up some unsolved mystery that no one could prove. But if there was corroborating evidence on the internet, or if wizards talked about it on the internet and enough Muggles saw it, it could start to cast an uncomfortable light onto the wizarding world. And, worse, the nature of the internet is such that the information would be almost impossible to erase or cover up. You can't do Memory Charms on people sitting at computers spread out all over the world."

There was silence for a moment as everyone digested what John had said. Then Hermione said, "Wow, I'd never really thought of it like that. I can see how that could happen. It still seems unlikely, but yes, I can see the danger. Do you think nobody at the Ministry would?"

Arthur shook his head. "Especially in the current climate, with Voldemort around, people would think it was trivial. I

mean, even I didn't know about this. If I tried to tell anybody about this, their attitude would be, oh, that's Arthur, he's always on about something to do with Muggles, and they'd ignore it."

Dentus nodded. "No matter who it was that tried to explain it, nobody would sit still for five minutes to listen to the explanation that John just gave. They just can't be bothered with anything to do with Muggles."

John looked at Harry. "Oh, and Harry... I know this won't thrill you, but I did some searches a few days ago, and your name is mentioned in these pages every now and then. It's hardly surprising, since yours is definitely the most famous name in the wizarding world right now, maybe even more than Voldemort's. Anyway, a few pages have information about your history—not only about being the Boy Who Lived, but stuff you've done at Hogwarts, even up to what happened a few weeks ago. They write about what was said publicly, and speculate about what really happened."

"Great," muttered Harry. "Just what I need, to be famous in the Muggle world."

"Well, that's nowhere near happening now, I was just talking about a long-term danger," John reassured him. "Also, there's a page whose focus is all six of you," he added, as Harry saw the others react with surprise. "The page is titled, 'The Potter Platoon,' and has pictures of all of you, and short biographies."

Now grinning, Harry surveyed his friends, who were looking at each other in mild alarm. "See, I warned you all about the danger of hanging around with me. Now, you can see it for yourselves."

"I'm going to have to visit my home and use the computer, check this out," said Hermione.

"You should know, you six are starting to get known as a unit," said Dentus. "Of course you already are at Hogwarts, since you all spend time together, and everyone knows how close you are with each other. But it's actually starting to come to Ministry attention, partly because of Harry's importance, and partly because of the abilities you're starting to manifest. For example, Hermione, I'm pretty sure most of the top leadership is now aware of you, now that you can do Harry's spells, and faced Voldemort with bravery. And very recently, Ginny and Neville, now that they can also do the energy-of-love spells."

"The Ministry leadership knows about that?" asked Neville, obviously surprised that the Aurors would have told them.

"The Aurors are responsible to the Ministry, Neville," pointed out Arthur. "I'd think they'd have to have a pretty good reason for keeping something like that secret, and something that could be that important, they almost have to tell them."

"Arthur's right, of course," affirmed Dentus. "Only you four can do this, which makes you of great interest to the leadership. I talked to my contacts more than usual yesterday, trying to find out anything interesting to tell you tonight. One thing I discovered is that they're starting to take the idea of the energy of love far more seriously."

"You mean they weren't before?" asked Harry. "I didn't know that. How could they ignore it?"

Dentus shrugged lightly. "You have to remember, according to the scientific community, there's no such thing as the energy of love. A few people believed that what you said

was factual, but most just thought you and Albus were exceptional, and you had a youthful and fanciful notion of the nature of what you had discovered, or that you just associated it with love mistakenly. They were more comfortable believing the scientific people. But now that they know that four of you can do it, they assume Harry taught it to the others, which he couldn't do unless he really knew what it was. Also, they don't ignore the fact that you four are two couples, obviously in love. That's making people rethink their attitudes. One even said—excuse me, Ron and Pansy—'You notice that the two not together can't do it, that's got to mean something.'"

"Well, they'll probably be able to soon, then," said Molly, with a pleased glance at Ron and Pansy.

"Mum," moaned Ron. "What are you going to do, call the Prophet and tell them? Oh, no, wait, you probably already have."

"You really do take this business of not wanting people to know about your personal life a bit too far," admonished his mother. "Goodness only knows when I would have found out if you were the only one who could have told me. A week before the wedding, probably."

"Yes, and the use of words like 'wedding' is part of the reason for that," Ron retorted.

"Don't worry, Ron, I know we've only been together for a day," Pansy assured him. "I don't have those kinds of expectations."

"It's her expectations I'm worried about, not yours," replied Ron.

"Well, pardon me for taking an interest in my son's life," said Molly, acting wounded by Ron's attitude.

"This topic reminds me, we haven't had a session for a week," said Harry. "How about tomorrow after dinner, would that be okay with everyone?"

The others nodded, except Neville. "I'll have to check, but I'm sure tomorrow night or Sunday night will be okay."

"On this topic," said Dentus, "there's something I should tell all four of you, and Ron and Pansy should be aware of it in case they learn to use the spells too... I've only been told this by one person, so it's not confirmed, but the person is someone I trust. Apparently, Fudge has been getting nervous lately about his personal security, he thinks that as Minister of Magic he'd be a pretty appealing target for Death Eaters. Which is true, and that's hardly a secret; that he's afraid of Voldemort and Death Eaters is an open secret at the Ministry."

"Must be, since even I knew it," said Arthur humorously.

"The new wrinkle," continued Dentus, "is that Fudge is thinking of you four in terms of your potential to aid in his personal security. Not like as part of a detail, of course, since you're all still at Hogwarts, but for special occasions, like where he's in public, or around large numbers of wizards. One of you could be around, say, under an Invisibility Cloak, and could protect him from a Killing Curse should one come at him."

Before any of Harry's friends could react, Molly did. "Why, that..." Appearing to be struggling not to use impolite language, she calmed down enough to say, "That's the most cowardly, despicable... you six have all put your lives at risk for this fight, and now Fudge, already well protected, wants

to hide behind you? I thought my opinion of him couldn't get any lower, but obviously I was wrong."

Harry appreciated Molly's concern on his and the others' behalf, and he couldn't help but agree that Fudge was not exactly behaving bravely. Still, he found that he wasn't personally offended, and his already low opinion of Fudge prevented his being terribly surprised.

"I can very well understand your reaction, Molly," said Dentus. "It may make you feel better to know that according to my contact, Kingsley reacted in much the same way when he was told about the idea, except that the language he used was much coarser than yours. He was speaking to my contact, of course, not Fudge. Among other things, he said that he now regretted telling the Ministry that Neville and Ginny could do it. Adding to his anger, of course, was the fact that Aurors already protect Fudge, and the implication of this idea is that they can't be totally counted on."

"Do you think he will end up making such a request?" asked Arthur, obviously not especially surprised that Fudge would contemplate such a thing. "And would he make it through the Aurors, or to Harry and the others directly?"

"That's a good question, Arthur, I don't know," replied Dentus. "It would be highly insulting to the Aurors if he didn't go through them, but I'm not sure that would stop him. Even he can't be so slow-witted as not to know how this looks to them. If he thought he could get the agreement of Harry and the others, he might present it to the Aurors as a fait accompli, and try to placate them to the extent necessary. He may not even do it at all; it's just something he thought of and talked to a couple of people about. But I thought it was only fair that the six of you know."

"What do you all think?" asked Arthur, obviously curious. Harry was curious as well to know what the others thought.

"I'm not as angry as Molly," volunteered Pansy, "but I don't like it at all. I don't want them putting their lives at risk for anything but what they positively want to, not because they're asked to."

"I'm definitely with Pansy on this," agreed Ron. "You can't risk your life because you're asked to. You have to do it because it's what you think is right."

"Not Aurors, Ron," pointed out Neville. "That's part of their job, and I'm training with them. They want me to become one, and I want to as well. If I do, doing that very kind of thing will be my job."

"Yeah, but you're not one yet," pointed out Ron. "And Hermione and Ginny certainly aren't. They could be asked this as well."

"That's true, and I'm not crazy about that," agreed Neville. "And I definitely don't want Harry doing this, even though he's training too. Aside from his being my friend who I'm concerned about, he's way too important to risk for something like that. It would be totally stupid."

"Neville's got a point, I hadn't thought of it that way," said Ron. "It would be like, in chess, putting the king at risk to protect a bishop. Does Fudge even know how important Harry is? Or does he just not care?"

Harry now wondered if Dentus knew about the prophecy; he was reasonably sure John didn't. He watched as Dentus responded. "Albus did tell me, and I'm not surprised that you're all aware of this, that there's substantial reason to believe that Harry will play a prominent role in Voldemort's

downfall. Considering that, Neville's point is a very good one; it would be foolish to put Harry at risk for this kind of purpose. As for whether Fudge knows this, I very much doubt it. Albus would have known Fudge either wouldn't believe it or wouldn't keep it to himself."

Harry noticed that if Dentus knew about the prophecy, he avoided referring to it, no doubt because of John's presence. Harry assumed that Dumbledore had either told Dentus the first part of the prophecy, or conveyed the essence. He decided to speak up. "Yes, but how much risk would I really be at? Especially if I had an Invisibility Cloak, or something like that, and can defend myself against the Killing Curse as well? What could they do?"

"Harry," said Hermione quietly and somberly, "would you want Ginny doing this?"

He hadn't expected that question. He looked across the table at Ginny, and knew the answer was obvious. "No," he said, equally quietly.

The others looked on with sympathy as Hermione nodded. "And I don't want Neville doing it, not for this kind of reason. Obviously, when we think about this, we're going to have different standards for what we accept as risk for ourselves, and what we're willing to have those we care about face. Harry knows this better than anyone, he spent a lot of last year struggling with it. It seems pretty clear that none of us thinks this is important enough for those we care about to risk their lives for it. Fudge can resign if he's so worried about being killed. And as for what you said about Aurors, Neville, it would be a good point, except that you and Harry aren't even official Aurors-in-training. What they're doing with you is purely personal on their part, nothing to do with their official duties as Aurors. Some of them, like Dawlish,

choose not to be a part of it, and you've said that they give up one of their days off every week to do it. I think that means that whatever obligation you have, you have to the Aurors who've trained you, not to the Ministry."

After a few seconds' silence, Harry said, "As usual, it's very hard to argue with Hermione. I assume this means that we're pretty much agreed that this is not something we're going to do?" He looked at the others, who by their nods or expressions indicated that they agreed.

Dentus looked at them in turn. "I have to say, I find it touching that what persuades each of you is the danger the others would face."

"Like Hermione said," said Harry, "we went through this a lot last year."

"You had ample opportunity," agreed Dentus. "I have a feeling Fudge would find that hard to understand, he's never had to worry about anyone's life before. Of course, this means you'll have to tell him no to his face if he chooses to bypass the Aurors."

"I don't look forward to that especially," said Harry, "but I find that if I think about Ginny being in that position, I'm pretty sure I can do it."

"Of course," said Molly emphatically, "Ginny's not of age, and Arthur and I would never have allowed it. But I was trying not to say anything, because I knew you six had to reach your own conclusions."

"Four," Ron corrected Molly.

"No, she's right, Ron," countered Hermione. "You and Pansy could start being able to do this anytime, especially now,

and then you'd be in the same position. And this had to be a kind of group decision anyway." Ron nodded his acknowledgment of her point.

"He may not end up asking you," pointed out Dentus, "or he might go through the Aurors, who would say no without even asking you, I'd bet. But it's good that you've thought about it."

"We wouldn't have been able to, if not for you," said Harry. "Thanks, we all appreciate it."

Dentus shrugged. "If we had a leadership that I could be proud to be part of, it wouldn't be necessary for you to be warned about that kind of thing at all."

"Well, that would be too much to hope for," said Molly. "Oh, have you two heard about Harry's news from Hogwarts? He's replacing McGonagall as Head of Gryffindor House."

Dentus's eyebrows rose. "My, my, yet another youngest-ever record. My impulse is to congratulate you, Harry, though I see from your expression that condolences would be more appropriate. You didn't want the position?"

Harry wondered just how strongly his expression showed how he felt. "I might not have minded so much if it happened next year, if I decided to stay. But you know how busy I was last year, and it's only going to be worse this year, now that I'm teaching the N.E.W.T. classes as well. I really don't need anything extra to worry about."

"Maybe," said John, "but it shows that McGonagall has confidence in you."

"No, it shows that there were no other former Gryffindors available who could do the job. She admitted that was the

reason."

"No, you're wrong there," said Hermione. "She put it that way so you'd accept it and not argue with her. But she's right, it is a serious responsibility. Do you really think she'd give it to you if she thought you couldn't handle it? She'd have done it herself even though it's a conflict, or had John do it. She'd break tradition or risk a conflict of interest rather than make someone Head of House who was irresponsible or not worthy of the position. You know her, you must realize that."

Harry was silent, thinking about what Hermione had said. "She's right, Harry," put in John. "I know Professor McGonagall well enough to know that."

"Well, maybe I'll go back and argue with her then, see if I can get her to have you do it," replied Harry humorously. "If you say so, Hermione. I still don't get it, really. I just don't think I'm the best person for this. I'm not the type who's going to discipline people; I'm just as likely to say, 'well, don't do it again.'"

"Harry," said Ron, "I'm going to be serious for a minute, so listen carefully."

Before he could continue, Pansy cut in. "That's my influence, I'm starting to work on him."

"Good idea to get started early, Pansy, there's a lot of work to be done," put in Hermione.

Ron gave Hermione an annoyed look, then turned to Harry and continued. "See, this is what I get for trying to be serious. Anyway, you are good for the position, even if you're not a disciplinarian. I doubt you're going to expel anyone, no matter what they do. But remember when we

flew the car to school, how Dumbledore made us feel, like we'd let him down? Especially the younger ones, you'll make them feel like that, without even trying. We wouldn't have felt so bad if we didn't respect and like Dumbledore as much as we did. That's how they feel about you. They won't want to let you down."

Harry had never thought of it that way. As he digested this, Hermione said, "Of course, he's right, I hadn't thought of that. I bet McGonagall understands that, and it's part of her reason for giving you the position. Also, I'm sure she wants you to have some experience in a very responsible position, for the future, if you stay on."

Harry felt he should explain what Hermione meant. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't repeat this to anyone," he said, looking at Dentus and John, "but Professor McGonagall told me that Albus wanted me to become the headmaster after she retires."

To Harry's surprise, Dentus and John chuckled. "I don't think that's much of a secret," explained Dentus. "It may not have been in the Prophet yet, but I know he has mentioned it to a few people, including me. I think he was laying the groundwork for it, putting the idea in people's heads."

"All the teachers know that's what he had in mind," added John. "And before you ask, no, no one resents it or feels that you don't deserve it. It's not a question of seniority. It has a lot to do with what Ron was talking about."

Harry found himself wishing the topic of conversation would change. He glanced up at Ginny, and saw from her grin that she knew how he felt. "Well, I still don't know what I'm going to do," he said. "But if I stay, then you have to be a teacher," he added, to Hermione.

"I probably will," she said. "I was going to tell you all, I was at the library today, and I ran into Professor McGonagall. We talked for a while. She was telling me that usually the headmaster or headmistress doesn't teach, certainly not a full schedule. She said that she will teach Transfiguration this year, but she wants me to do it next year. She basically offered me the job. I said I'd think about it, but I'm sure I'll do it."

Everyone at the table smiled; Molly got up, walked over to Hermione, and kissed her on the cheek. She accepted congratulations, then Ron said, "Wow, Hermione a teacher, who would have ever imagined it?"

She gave him a wry smile. "Thank you, Ron. I know that's as close to 'congratulations' as I'm going to get from you."

Sitting next to Hermione, Ron stood and leaned over. "Congratulations, Hermione. I know you'll do great." Then, to Harry's great surprise, he too gave her a kiss on the cheek. He sat down to laughter, as people took in Hermione's stunned look. "Pansy told me to do it," smiled Ron, to more laughter.

"I did not," laughed Pansy, obviously pleased. "And if I had, I wouldn't have imagined that you'd actually do it. Now, that was a lot more surprising than her being Head Girl. I mean what you did, of course, not her being a teacher."

"Oh, you're Head Girl?" asked John. "I hadn't heard, but yes, I would have been stunned if it hadn't been you. Head Boy was Ernie, right?"

Harry nodded. "Right. How about you, Archibald, were you a prefect, or Head Boy?"

"Both, I confess," said Archibald. "Always was ambitious, rule-abiding, that sort of thing."

"Which house were you in?" asked Harry.

"Slytherin, of course," replied Dentus. "You are familiar with the 4-3-2-1 rule, aren't you, Harry?"

Harry and Neville nodded. "Yes, the Aurors explained it to us," said Harry. To his other friends, he continued, "It's something they say about the Aurors and the Ministry. They say that the composition of Aurors by house works out roughly as 40% Gryffindor, 30% Hufflepuff, 20% Ravenclaw, and 10% Slytherin. And with the Ministry, it's the exact opposite: 40% Slytherin, and so on. Apparently it's very accurate, and has been for over a century."

"Yes, it means the Sorting Hat does its job pretty well," agreed Dentus. "And the higher up in the Ministry you go, the more Slytherins you find."

"What did you study at Hogwarts, Archibald?" asked Harry. "I mean, what did you get N.E.W.T.s in?"

Dentus raised his eyebrows. "The usual things for becoming a politician... History of Magic, Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies, Charms, and a few of the usual subjects. Why do you ask?"

Harry shrugged. "Just wondering."

Dentus smiled. "Why, Harry, I think that's the first time you've ever lied to me. You really should avoid it, or I could teach you, you could get better at it."

The others chuckled at Harry's expression as he asked, "Are you a—"

"No, I'm not a Legilimens. But you have to remember, I've spent my career in a profession in which I dealt with truly professional liars, people who lie all the time, and for whom being good at it is practically a prerequisite for advancement. So, when you lie to me... I say this with affection, I'm sure you know, but you lie with all the subtlety and finesse of a four-year-old who denies having broken the vase which is lying in pieces at his feet."

Harry felt himself blushing as the others laughed yet again. "All right... I didn't want to just come out and say this, but now I suppose I have to. Professor Binns isn't coming back next year, and we need a new History of Magic teacher. I thought of you, that you would be good at it."

Dentus was obviously surprised. "Why would you think that? Being a politician doesn't necessarily involve the same skills as being a teacher."

"It's not because you were a politician, exactly," answered Harry. "It's because... you've been teaching me about politics for a few months now. I have absolutely no interest in it, as you know, but you make it interesting enough that I pay attention and learn it anyway. It seems to me that being able to teach someone something they don't care whether they learn or not is very important in being a teacher."

"Is that from your perspective as a student, or a teacher?" asked John.

"Both, but more as a student," said Harry. "I've always felt that I'm lucky, that I teach a class that's very directly useful to someone's life. Well, okay, maybe more to mine than most people's, but most students know that being able to defend yourself is very important."

"Well, Harry, I will say that I'm flattered," said Dentus. "I would never have thought of it. I may be a bit rusty on my history, but I suspect with some study, I could get up to speed. I have been enjoying my retirement, however, and would hate to give it up, even for a few years."

"But you would have remained a politician for a while, wouldn't you, if the thing with Voldemort hadn't happened?" pressed Harry.

Dentus appeared amused at Harry's enthusiasm. "You're pushing a little hard," he advised. "You want to back off, give me time to think about it."

"See, even now you're being a teacher, telling me the best way to persuade someone of something," Harry responded. "Sorry, I didn't mean to push you. I'd just like to see it, and not just because I want to help Professor McGonagall find someone."

"I know, and I appreciate it. It would be interesting, to teach you in an actual class."

"Actually, I'm not taking History of Magic anymore," Harry pointed out. "I failed the O.W.L., and had to cut back on my classes to be a teacher last year."

"Ah, I see. Well, let's make that a condition of doing this, then. If I end up doing this, then you have to take my class."

"Archibald, I would really want to, but my schedule's very tight as it is..." Harry trailed off, then thought again. He was very busy, but he really did want to have Dentus teaching there, and it was only two more hours a week. Harry made a decision. "All right. If you come as a teacher, I'll take your class."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "Wow, you really do want him to come." To Dentus, she said, "He really is busy. I should know, I'm the one who didn't get to spend as much time with him as I would have liked in the last few months."

"It would be nice to have a proper History of Magic lesson, though," Harry mused. To Dentus's puzzled expression, Harry explained how Professor Binns' classes were regarded. "So, it would be a bit like it was for me last year, replacing Umbridge. You couldn't possibly do worse."

"It's always nice to benefit from low expectations," said Dentus wryly. "Oh, speaking of her... you may be interested to know that apparently, she's beginning to peek her head out from behind the rock she's been hiding under. Since returning from Hogwarts, she's kept a very low profile, practically invisible, though she never resigned her position as an undersecretary. She lost a lot of whatever influence she had. Now she's starting to talk to people again. I assume she's trying to determine how much of the influence she had before she can get back. If I had to guess, I'd say that Albus's death has emboldened her to come out of hiding."

It had to happen sometime, Harry thought. Ron spoke up, asking, "Can she really come back now? After torturing Harry, and setting those dementors onto him? Is everyone at the Ministry going to just ignore that?"

"Unfortunately, Ron, now that the dementors aren't under Ministry control, it would be very hard to prove that she did that, even though you heard her admit it," said Dentus. "But it may be possible to do something... Harry, would you be willing, if interviewed by the Prophet, to give details of what she did that year?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure. What good would it do, though?"

"Well, obviously, you have a status now that you didn't have two years ago," explained Dentus. "What she did to you is going to look a lot worse to people now than it would have then, and anything you said would be believed now, while it wouldn't have been then. It could be... made clear to her that now is not the best time for her to make a comeback, while if she waited until, say, after Voldemort is defeated, then the timing would be better for her."

"Ah," said an obviously satisfied Ron. "Blackmail."

Dentus gave Ron a faint smile. "Politics, Ron. Worse things than that happen all the time. This is exactly the sort of thing that your father, to his great credit, wants no part of. I myself prefer to only do it in the service of what I consider to be a very good cause, and this strikes me as one."

"I will say, Archibald," said Arthur seriously, "I've heard what she did, and I have no qualms about this being done, moral or otherwise."

Molly said nothing, but her expression made it clear that she agreed with her husband. John said, "I suspect you'd have no trouble getting a lot of quotes for the article from the Hogwarts teaching staff."

Harry felt that he should give his explicit approval, since he understood it would be done on his behalf. "If this is something you can do, Archibald, I'd like you to do it. I can't imagine that her coming back is going to do anybody any good."

"I understand, Harry," said Dentus. "I'll look into it, let you know what happens."

Three hours later, after Dentus and John had left and with Arthur and Molly upstairs, the six students were in the living

room talking. Harry and Ginny sat at one end of the sofa, his arms around her as she sat as close to him as possible while still facing the others. Ron and Pansy were at the other end of the sofa, her leaning against him. Neville and Hermione sat in chairs, holding hands. Harry wondered if he and Ginny were being even less reserved about physical closeness in front of the others, since now that Ron and Pansy were together, no one had to feel left out.

"So, what did you all think of Dentus?" Harry asked the others.

"Pretty impressive," answered Hermione. "I'd say you're lucky to have him helping you. I can really see how he'd be a good teacher, I hope he accepts."

"Me too, I'd even pay attention in History of Magic," agreed Pansy.

"I liked how he called you on lying," smiled Ron.

"Yeah, you would like that," retorted Harry.

"You know he was just teasing you, Harry," said Ginny, moving a hand off his arm and holding his right hand. "I think he knew why you did that. But yeah, I liked him too. And I'm glad he's willing to do that thing with Umbridge."

Ron made a noise of disgust. "When he mentioned her name, I almost said, 'damn centaurs,' but I didn't want a lecture from Mum."

"I'm not sure she'd have given you one, Ron," said Ginny. "We told you some of what she said the night Percy was killed. She knows Umbridge tried to have Harry killed, and it's not that different. She might have even been with you. I'm not sure."

Hermione looked at Ron. "So, you wished the centaurs had killed her? You truly wish she were dead?"

Ron thought for a few seconds. "Yes, I do. In a way, it's like you're asking me whether I approve of people who kill people being executed by the government. She tried to have Harry killed, so should she die for that? I know Harry doesn't agree with me. He didn't let Sirius and Remus kill Pettigrew, and what he did was even worse than what Umbridge did. If I'd been in his position, I'd have let them do it."

Harry thought back to that event, about how he'd felt. "You might be right, Ron, but I'm not sure you can really know something like that until you're in the situation, when it's your decision whether someone lives or dies. There's a real... I don't know how to say it, pressure, maybe... you know what I mean, you've been in dangerous situations. It's similar, but different. It's like, you really find out how you feel about something, and in my case, it was something different than what I thought it would be."

Ron thought again. "I see what you mean, and maybe you're right. All I know is that's how I feel now, and I think I would in the situation. You wouldn't, Hermione? You led her to the centaurs, after all. You must've known what could have happened."

Hermione looked uncomfortable. "That's not exactly something I'm proud of, Ron. I mean, I would do it again, to save Harry, but... it's a bit like with Harry and Goyle in January. If Harry had another way, he would have done it, and so would I. She could easily have been killed. I can see why you say she deserves it; I can't disagree. But I was glad that Dumbledore went in there and saved her. It took some of the load off my conscience."

Ginny looked at Ron curiously. "Would you kill her, Ron? If you could, if you wouldn't get caught, no one would know... would you?"

Ron looked almost disappointed at his own answer. "I'm not sure; I have a feeling I wouldn't. But I should, if I want her dead; it's almost like I just don't have the nerve to do it myself." Ron glanced at Pansy, and his face hardened. "But one thing I do know... if I had a chance to kill Malfoy, I would." Harry saw Pansy look up at him, her expression seemingly both grateful and concerned.

"I would too, Ron," said Hermione. "I think we all would, if we could, because we all care about Pansy. We know that she's in danger as long as he's alive. But let me ask you... would it be because of what he might do in the future, or what he did in the past?"

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Does it matter?"

She spoke quietly. "There's probably no right answer to that. I think it does, anyway."

"Then I guess I couldn't answer right away," he said. "I just know that the threat to Pansy is what makes me so certain." He held her a little more tightly as he spoke.

Harry didn't think he could kill anybody even if he wanted to. He was sure that using the energy of love would prevent him from doing so, but he could understand how Ron felt, as was sure the others could as well. He wondered how he would feel if someone had made the same vicious threats to Ginny as Malfoy had made to Pansy.

He was still thinking about it when he went to bed that night, and he asked Fawkes to sing after he did his

Occlumency exercises. He wondered whether Ron might find it as helpful as he would.

* * * * *

Harry groggily looked up at the alarm clock, which read 7:08. It was set at 7:30 to prevent them from oversleeping, especially on days Harry was with the Aurors, but they had not yet slept long enough to need it. He looked over at the sleeping Ron and decided to have some fun. He got up and nudged Ron, saying, "Wake up, Ron, hurry up. We've got that big Transfiguration exam today, remember."

Ron's eyes shot open. "Oh, bloody hell, I-" He took in his surroundings, and Harry's smiling face. He exhaled, lay back, and gave Harry a look of great annoyance, though Harry was sure it was mostly annoyance at himself for being taken in. "Harry, have I ever told you how incredibly funny you are?"

"No, you haven't," replied Harry, playing along even though he knew where Ron was headed.

"And it turns out there's an excellent reason for that," Ron said, following up as Harry had expected. As they changed from their pajamas into their regular clothes, Ron asked, "So, Dumbledore talk to you last night?"

Ron had asked this most every morning since they had returned to the Burrow. Sometimes Harry answered seriously, and sometimes he made a joke; he assumed Ron had started asking regularly as a running joke, or to see what kind of answer Harry came up with. Today Harry said, "Yes, we talked about sex."

Harry got his reward, which was a split-second look of surprise, followed by Ron's attempt to look casual, as though

he hadn't been fooled at all. "If you don't want to tell me what he said, just say so."

Harry chuckled. "Wouldn't surprise me if he did, actually. If he doesn't, it's because he doesn't have anything to say about it, or because he knows I'll be embarrassed. Well, no, he wouldn't care that I was embarrassed." They finished dressing, but Harry stayed in the room, not heading right downstairs as usual. "No, we talked about the stuff that was talked about at dinner last night."

"Ah, so it was kind of heavy, then. Do you want to wake up the girls, tell them too?"

Harry hesitated. "No, I might tell you differently than I'd tell them. Some of it had to do with you."

Standing in readiness to go downstairs, Ron sat on his bed and looked at Harry expectantly. "Well, go ahead."

Serious now, Harry said, "A lot of it had to do with what you said, about wishing Umbridge were dead."

Ron nodded slowly. "He thinks I shouldn't wish that?"

Harry tilted his head. "Not that, exactly. He probably does think that, but he wouldn't say you shouldn't wish for it, because he's not very judgmental, especially since he died. No, it's more that he thinks you're... he talked about it for a while, and it's kind of hard to say simply and quickly. He says you're kind of damaging yourself, like I temporarily damaged myself when I did the Cruciatus Curse on Lestranger, only in your case it's much longer and slower. And, he thinks, more dangerous, because you-not just you, but anyone who has similar feelings-don't realize what you're doing. While what I did was like touching a hot stove,

he thinks what you're doing is more like very slow poison. It won't kill you, but it'll hurt you."

Ron looked puzzled. "But it's not like I obsess over it, constantly thinking about how I'd love to see her dead. Also, it's just thinking, not actually doing, like in your case. Sorry," he added, not wanting to rub Harry's nose in what he had done.

"I know what you mean," agreed Harry. "I said the same thing to him, and he explained why he thinks this. I only sort of understand it, so I may not be able to say it to you very well, but I'll try.

"The basic gist of it seems to be that thoughts are more powerful than we realize they are. We think they're harmless, because except with magic, we think things or wish things and they don't happen. Thoughts are one thing, reality is another. We can think one thing and do another, and we see what we did, not what we thought. He said the dangerous thing is that if we think something, it sort of creates a foundation for the idea that it might happen someday. It steers us in a certain direction. Like, if you're on a diet and you always think about how much you want to eat something fattening, you're more likely to do it eventually, but if you can manage not to think about it, you probably won't do it. He said, thoughts lead to actions, and thoughts lead to words, which lead to actions. He also said, 'The line between wishing someone dead and actually killing them is far thinner than most people would like to believe.' He's afraid that by having that wish, you're doing something destructive to yourself and don't realize it."

Harry could see that Ron was disturbed by the idea, and that he took it seriously because it came from Dumbledore. "So

he thinks that I should just change my mind, that I shouldn't wish her dead anymore? I can just do that?"

Harry shook his head. "He's not trying to tell you what you should or shouldn't do. It's more like, if you're going to think this, or wish it, you should be aware of what you're doing, of the danger. He said it was like a slow decay, so slow that most people don't notice it. But with us, we six, it's more dangerous, because we get put in situations where we could have to make important, life-or-death decisions with not much time to think. If we've primed ourselves to think in a certain way, it makes us more likely to act in that way, in the situation."

"Is he afraid that I'm going to kill someone?" asked Ron, surprised.

"He didn't say that, but it does kind of follow from what he said. Or, at least, you put yourself in danger of doing so, if you don't do whatever you do with a lot of conscious thought. Bear in mind, a lot of this didn't really sink in with me, either, so I'm not going to be able to say it nearly as well as he did. I do know that he meant that even if you don't end up killing or hurting anyone, thinking that way still harms you."

"So I assume he thinks the same thing about my being willing to kill Malfoy? Because I'm not changing my mind about that."

"He said that's not the same thing," explained Harry, "because it's very conscious. Having that desire does damage you, as would actually killing him, but you would do it to protect Pansy, you would cause yourself harm to keep her from harm. That's a conscious decision, you know it would hurt you. What you think about Umbridge, you don't

know will hurt you. That was the main difference, according to him."

"So," wondered Ron, "this advice was mainly for me, not for you? You wouldn't kill Malfoy if you could?"

Embarrassed, Harry said, "Well, I kind of hesitate to say what he said about me, because I'm afraid it'll seem—"

"—like you think you're better than I am," Ron finished. "I promise I won't think that, Harry. I would like to know."

Reluctantly, Harry nodded. "The fact is, I couldn't kill Malfoy if I wanted to. I accept the fact that using the energy of love won't let me do it. In a way, it was a good thing that the thing with Lestrage happened, especially when it did. It was like being immunized, he said. Having the experience of doing it made me decide firmly not to do it again, and that helped me become able to use the energy of love. Also, he said Fawkes wouldn't have chosen me if I could want a person dead. Phoenixes dislike anger and violence, they can't deal with it. Remember after the department store attack, when we were in that room at the Ministry? Fawkes usually shows up if I'm having a hard time, to help me, but he didn't then. It was because I was angry, angry at Albus, angry at the situation. He couldn't be around me then; he showed up later at the Burrow when I had calmed down. Anyway, back to the main point, Albus said that when I threw myself into feeling love, during the Voldemort thing last September, that I made a mental shift that changed my whole life, I just didn't know it then. He said I committed myself to a different way of thinking, that it was a positive example of the importance and power of thoughts. I focused on love so intensely, and for so long, that it changed who I was, in a way."

"Hard to argue with that," said Ron thoughtfully. "I guess I see what he means. Of course, I don't have this huge incentive to change the way I think, like you did."

"That's true," agreed Harry. "I don't think he thinks you will, he just wanted you to be aware of it."

"Well, I'll certainly think about it, anyway. Be kind of hard not to. Well, what do you say we get on down to breakfast?" Harry nodded, and they headed out. "Oh, and buck up, Harry, maybe he'll talk to you about sex tomorrow."

"If he does, I promise to tell you all about it, in detail," Harry joked as they started down the stairs.

"Even if it's about you?"

"Sorry, I meant to say, I promise not to tell you about it."

"That's what I thought you said."

* * * * *

Trailing behind Kingsley, Harry walked into the dining area of the Aurors' training center four days later. Neville and a half-dozen Aurors were already there, waiting for the house-elves to bring lunch. "Well, he did it," announced Kingsley. "Took his first bout from me dueling." As Harry sat down, Kingsley playfully mussed his hair. "Ah, they grow up too quickly."

"Especially him," agreed Jack Temble, sitting next to Harry. "Congratulations, Harry. There's more than one Auror who never takes a bout from him."

"So, who won the pool?" asked Neville.

Tonks looked disappointed. "There wasn't one, dammit. Somebody should have thought of that."

"Well, we can't have a pool for everything," observed Jack.

"Seems that way sometimes," said Neville.

Tonks grinned. "He's just annoyed that we had one on how fast he'd learn to Apparate."

"No, I'm annoyed because you felt you had to tell me how Harry did before I tried," replied Neville, in the same spirit. In a slight imitation of Tonks' voice, he went on, "Oh, and Harry did it on his first try, Neville. No pressure, though."

Harry was too embarrassed to laugh, but the Aurors did. "Aurors have to be able to handle the pressure, Neville," joked Kingsley.

"Probably she was just remembering it because she won the one on me," said Harry to Neville.

"I won his, too," said Tonks happily. "Picked twenty minutes, only a minute off."

"Twenty minutes is very good, Neville," said Kingsley, obviously impressed. "A lot of us didn't do it that fast. You can't go by Harry, he's one of those people who screws up the average." Neville had a small smile, but didn't respond; Harry assumed he was just giving Tonks a hard time, but didn't want to admit it.

"You must have had to do a lot of paperwork for this," observed Harry. "Not only getting him permission early, but also an exception from the ARA."

Kingsley shrugged. "Yeah, but it makes perfect sense, like it did with you when we did it then, just for a different reason. Being able to use your spells makes him a potentially important resource. We've done it for Hermione and Ginny, too, we were going to ask you to talk to them, see when they can make it in. We want to give them a half-day of Apparation training, pretty much what we just did with Neville."

Harry's first thought was that Ron would be very displeased that his younger sister would be able to learn to Apparate before him, but Harry thought it wasn't the best thing to say to the Aurors. Instead, he said, "I'm sure they'll be happy to. We'll talk to them."

"Good," said Kingsley. Looking uncomfortable, he continued, "Look, there's a promise we had to make, that we were pressured to make, in return for doing that. It was to relay a request from Fudge, a request that you should feel complete freedom to reject. He wants—"

"—us to use the spells to protect him," Harry finished, then saw Kingsley looking more surprised than he'd ever seen him look. "Yeah, we heard about that. We decided we weren't going to do it."

"Good for you," said Jack firmly. "Sniveling coward..."

Kingsley was looking from Harry to Neville, seemingly trying to work out how they had found out. "Boy, you've got some good contacts. Not many people knew about that. But yes, I'm glad you said no. If you'd said yes, I'd have tried to talk you out of it. I was really angry that they even made us promise to ask in return for making sure that Neville and the others could Apparate, which is a perfectly legitimate request. Well, I'm glad that now I can tell them I asked, you

said no, and that's that. But I won't tell them that you knew already, I'll let them think you thought it over."

Harry wasn't sure he cared whether Kingsley let them think that or not, but he knew it was probably better to do so. "Did you have anything in particular in mind with Ginny and Hermione, after teaching them to Apparate?"

"Nothing specific, no," replied Kingsley. "Just that their abilities make them potentially valuable, and for better causes than protecting politicians. I don't want to have a situation where their help could be very useful, but the ARA hinders them from traveling. Oh, and Harry, you almost don't need this because you have Fawkes, but we arranged this for both you and Neville. You both have the same exemption from the ARA that Aurors have. As we already explained to Neville, we can't Apparate casually, but we can in the course of our duties as Aurors, though we try to avoid it if we can. You two will have the same status. You may not be Aurors, but there may be times when you'll need to Apparate as if you were, so now you can. You don't have to justify it to the Ministry, just to us."

"I understand, thanks," said Harry. "Although I'm not sure what situation—"

He was interrupted by a very loud alarm that seemed to be coming from not only the room they were in, but every adjacent room as well. Startled, he saw the Aurors leap to their feet and Disapparate; all were gone in less than a second. He looked at Neville, now the only other person in the room. "What the hell... do you know what just happened?" He had to shout for Neville to hear him above the alarms.

"It's their pendants, someone's-" Neville cut himself off as the alarms suddenly ceased, and he was shouting in the silence. Changing to a normal tone, he continued. "You remember how our pendants have that adrenaline alarm? Well, theirs do too, of course. One of theirs just went off."

Harry felt his heart sink, as he understood that at least one Auror was in mortal danger. "Fawkes!" he shouted, and Fawkes appeared. "Can you take me to wherever that happened?" Fawkes settled onto the table in front of them as Harry tried to clear his mind so he could understand whatever Fawkes might want to communicate to him. He immediately knew the answer, though, because if Fawkes could take him, he would be in the air, tail feathers sticking out. Harry listened anyway. Neville stayed quiet, knowing what Harry was doing.

Half a minute later Harry exhaled, frustrated. "He can't," he said to Neville. "I should have known he couldn't, but I had to be sure. He was just letting me know that I'm really the only person whose location he can simply know. He also let me know that the closer I am to a person—emotionally closer, not physically closer—the more easily he can know where they are, even if I don't, but it's not instant. He has to focus, it's harder. It's as if where I am is a bright beacon, because we're bonded, and the people I'm close to are very faint, but visible, because of their connection to me. Probably you and the others are the only ones he could do that with. Well, maybe Molly and Arthur, too."

"So, obviously, if you knew where it was, he could take you," Neville clarified.

Harry nodded. "Damn, I wonder what happened."

"I think we have to assume there was another Death Eater attack," Neville speculated. "Maybe a few went out to the scene and ran into some trouble, maybe there were more lying in wait, or something."

"I wish we could do something besides just sit here," said Harry impatiently. "But I guess we can't, we just have to wait for someone to come back and tell us what happened." Neither said anything for a few minutes. Then Harry said, "They couldn't just Apparate out to the scene, right? They had to find out where it was first."

"Yes, that's right," agreed Neville. "They had to go to the place where all the Auror movements are tracked and Apparation is detected. So the ones here with us would have gone straight there, looked to see where it was, and then Apparated to the scene. I doubt they got there in time to do anything, though."

Harry hoped Neville was wrong, but knew he was probably right. Another few minutes passed in silence, neither Harry nor Neville touching their half-eaten food.

Finally there were two simultaneous popping sounds, and Kingsley and Tonks appeared, both grim. "Teddy and Anna," said Tonks, trying hard to control her emotions. "Both dead."

Harry looked down for a moment as he absorbed the information. He had met Anna a few times, but hardly knew her. Teddy had participated in his training occasionally, and had always been friendly. But Harry knew that how he felt wasn't a question of how well he knew them, but of how this affected the Aurors, of whom he felt a part even though he wasn't officially one. I'd been having such a nice summer, Harry thought, that I'd forgotten that we're in the middle of a war. The summer didn't feel so nice anymore.

"What happened?" asked Neville, obviously very upset as well.

"It was an ambush," said Kingsley quietly. "They were responding to a call, an unauthorized Apparation. It was only one Apparation, but when they got to the scene, there were at least eight Death Eaters there... and Voldemort. They all got away by taking Portkeys when we got there--most all of us went to the scene--but Voldemort stayed just long enough for us to get a glimpse of him, he wanted us to know that he had done it. The Dark Mark was up, of course. They set it all up, used a Portkey or whatever to get there, except for one--probably Voldemort--who Apparated there, so we'd send out two Aurors, as usual. They didn't stand a chance, not against that many."

Harry found himself imagining it, and felt rage toward the Death Eaters and Voldemort. Then he looked up at Fawkes and reflexively tried to get rid of the feeling or at least minimize it, as he knew how it affected Fawkes. He had an idea that had started forming even before he found out what had happened, and he wanted to know if it could be done. He looked at Kingsley and asked, "What happens the next time there's a report of an unauthorized Apparation?"

Kingsley slowly nodded, understanding Harry's meaning. "We have to decide that. Right this second, probably twenty of us would go."

That made sense to Harry. Now, they would have to assume any unauthorized Apparation was a similar trap, and act accordingly. It would be a drain on their time and resources, which Harry assumed was part of the reason for it. "The next time there's a call," he said, "I want to go."

"Me, too," said Neville quickly.

Kingsley regarded them solemnly, obviously still very emotionally affected by the deaths. "So you can protect whoever goes."

Neville nodded. "And I think Hermione and Ginny will want to too, when they find out about this."

"They can't Apparate yet," pointed out Tonks.

"Then they should learn, as soon as possible," said Harry. He wasn't happy about the idea that Ginny would go into a combat situation, but he knew she would want to, and that he had to respect it. "In the meantime, if there's a call and I go to the scene, Fawkes can pick them up and take them there. They'd get there only a few seconds after I did."

Kingsley appeared torn. "I'm not thrilled at the idea of using sixteen-year-olds in combat situations."

Harry understood that Kingsley wasn't referring to their lack of experience, but rather that he didn't want them at risk. "Kingsley, we've all been in combat, in situations that make going out surrounded by Aurors look like a tea party. And it makes sense, you know it does. I know you weren't training Neville and I with the idea that you'd be using us this soon. But we really want to help, and it would be a waste not to let us. And remember one other thing-what Albus did to Voldemort, he thinks I did. If he's out with them the next time it happens, and he sees me, he may get scared and leave right away. There might not even be a fight."

Kingsley sighed. "You're right, it does make sense," he admitted. "But this isn't a decision I can make right now. I need a little time... I mean, this just happened."

Harry decided to press. "I know... but the next call could come any time."

Kingsley closed his eyes, then opened them. "All right. Provisionally—I could change my mind at any time—you're coming with us on the next call. Tonks, are you okay to coordinate with them, make sure they know exactly what to do?"

She nodded. "I could use something constructive to do. I'll show them what to do, and teach the girls to Apparate this afternoon if they want to do this. You go on ahead, I'll keep in touch."

Kingsley looked at Harry and Neville. "Thanks, both of you." He Disapparated.

"Okay," said Harry to Tonks, "I'll call Ginny on my hand, ask her and Hermione to come down here. Then—"

"No, Harry," interrupted Tonks. "You and Neville go there, talk to them there. I don't want them here when they find out about this, I don't want them feeling like they should have to do this. Tell them at the Burrow. You'll have to have Molly's approval for Ginny anyway. Whoever agrees can come back here, I'll tell you all the procedure for responding to a call, and I'll do Apparation training after that, if necessary."

"All right," agreed Harry. He lifted his left hand and looked into his palm, and spoke before Ginny had a chance to look back at him. "Ginny, get everyone who's there together in the living room." She nodded, and Harry put his hand down. "Let's go, Neville." They walked to the fireplace.

At five-thirty Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny exited the Burrow's fireplace one by one, as Ron and Pansy got up from the sofa. "Molly! They're back!" yelled Pansy.

Molly walked into the room from the kitchen, wearing an apron. "Good, I was wondering how long they were going to keep you. Well, I want to know what happened, of course, but I also want to wait for Arthur, it's pointless to have to tell the story twice. Maybe you-" She stopped talking as the fireplace lit up again, and Arthur came through. "Oh, good, that helps," she said, kissing her husband on the cheek.

"It was all over the building about the Aurors, of course," said Arthur, addressing Harry and Neville. "I'm sorry. Did you know them well?"

"Teddy somewhat, and Anna hardly at all, but you know how it is with Aurors, that almost doesn't matter that much," replied Harry solemnly. "Neville and I may not be real Aurors, but they've made us feel like part of the group enough that this really affects us."

"Which is the only reason..." Molly looked at her husband hesitantly, which Harry could barely recall her ever doing. "I did something I should have waited for your input to do, Arthur. But there was an urgency to it, the kids were so insistent... I gave our permission for Ginny to go out on calls with them. Harry and Neville persuaded Kingsley to take them next time, and Hermione and Ginny wanted to too."

"They want to protect them," nodded Arthur. "I thought about the possibility, of course. I assume you felt it was urgent because the next attack could have happened at any time?"

"Yes, Hermione and I spent the whole afternoon Apparating," said Ginny. "I'd always looked forward to Apparating, thought it'd be fun, but now it isn't, not in this situation." Harry wondered if she was saying that in case Ron envied her, but a glance at Ron showed no signs that he did.

"So, now we're all set on what to do if there's another call," explained Hermione. "Our pendants will let us know, and we immediately Apparate to the room where they detect Apparations, or take a fireplace if we're here since we can't Disapparate from here. Then we all go out to where it's happening. For the first few times, Aurors will take Ginny, Neville and I, just to be sure we end up where we're supposed to. Harry's practiced enough so that his aim is good enough, he can do it by himself."

"Do you think they're really going to do it again, so soon?" asked Arthur. "Wouldn't it be smarter for them to not do it again for a while, wait until the Aurors get tired of sending ten or twenty people every time there's a call?"

"They might do that," agreed Neville. "But the Aurors have to assume every unauthorized Apparation from this point on could be a trap. So there isn't much choice, really. It's either send lots of people every time, or let the Death Eaters Apparate at will again."

Harry, Ginny, Hermione, and Neville took turns relating the rest of the day's events, after which Molly returned to preparing dinner and Arthur went upstairs. Hermione said, "Oh, I just remembered something that happened this morning, I was going to tell you before all this happened. I got a fireplace call from Rita Skeeter."

This can't be good, thought Harry. "What did she want?"

"Apparently she was offered an interview with Fudge. She didn't say it exactly like this, but the Ministry wants her to do a favorable story about him. Basically, be as unfairly positive about him as she was negative about Harry and I in what she wrote in fourth year. She wanted to ask my permission to do it, though of course she didn't admit that

was what she was doing. She was all snide as usual, and asked if I was going to make trouble for her if she did it. I decided that she's been on the sidelines for two years, and that's enough. I told her that as long as she doesn't write about us, and as long as she tells the truth, she can do what she wants."

"Bet she wasn't exactly grateful," guessed Harry.

"No, her first reaction was, 'with those kinds of restrictions, what can I really do?' She was just being sarcastic, of course, but there was obviously some truth to it as well. I told her to just consider it a challenge, then she said something else snide and left the fireplace. I wondered if I did the right thing letting her write again, but I was worried that if I let it go on too long, she'd just get fed up and decide it was worth getting in trouble for being an unregistered Animagus so she could try to get me in trouble for blackmailing her."

"Actually, I kind of wondered about that," said Ron. "If that happened, could you get into any real trouble? If somehow she could prove it?"

"She can't, Ron," said Hermione with certainty. "It's all verbal, she can't prove a thing. Even if she put the memories into a Pensieve, it wouldn't help, since in legal proceedings memories are considered more as testimony than proof, because Pensieve memories can be wrong or faked. But even if she somehow could, it's debatable whether what I did was strictly illegal. It would be if I made her do something illegal, or give me money or a service of some kind. Since all I did was make her not do something, it probably wouldn't really be considered blackmail. So while I wasn't worried so much about legal trouble, I was starting to get concerned about how it would look, since I'm starting to become well known in the wizarding world after facing

Voldemort. If she didn't mind suffering her own legal fate, she could make my life more miserable. I'm just hoping that now, she'll leave us alone."

"I don't know, Hermione," said Pansy. "I was there when you were talking to her, and she seemed kind of unbalanced." To the others' surprised looks, Pansy explained, "Not like she's a loony, though, I just mean that I think she really hates Hermione, the way she came across. If she thought she could hurt Hermione without getting into big trouble herself, I really think she would do it."

"Fortunately, she can't," said Hermione. "Being found out would end her career—the Prophet wouldn't employ her anymore—so she'll never risk it. I know she hates me, but I don't care. She picked a fight with me, and came out on the wrong end. Too bad for her."

Harry's first thought was of Marietta Edgecombe, who had also ended up on the wrong end of Hermione's wrath. He hoped that aggressive streak would help them when turned against Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and he hoped it would be soon.

* * * * *

Harry bolted awake as he felt something like static electricity on his chest. It was his pendant, and that was the signal that would be sent out to all Aurors in the event of an unauthorized Apparation. Fawkes appeared; Harry quickly grabbed his tail, and found himself in the Apparation detection room. Fawkes then disappeared, Harry knew, to get Ginny and Hermione. A few Aurors Apparated in, although most were already there or had arrived faster. As Harry looked up at the maps showing where the Apparation had occurred, he saw Ginny and Hermione arrive. He didn't

spare them a glance, as he was focused on zeroing in on the exact spot where the Apparation had occurred.

"Everyone got it? Let's go!" shouted Kingsley, and twenty Aurors and four teenagers Disapparated. Harry willed himself to the spot he had visualized, and he was suddenly in a field. There was no light except for moonlight, but his eyes adjusted quickly, as in anticipation of this problem the detection room's lights had been dimmed. He looked around, and saw no one but the Aurors.

"I saw him," shouted Cassandra, to make sure she was heard by everyone. "He was over by that tree. Wearing a hood, so I couldn't make out the face, and he disappeared less than a second after I saw him. Took a Portkey, I'm sure of it."

"Well, we thought this might happen," said Kingsley. "Okay, let's be sure. Look around, four groups, one of the kids with each one." Harry teamed up with five Aurors and followed them, ready to activate the Killing Curse shield at a second's notice, but they found nothing and no one. Kingsley called off the search after a few minutes, and they all Apparated back to the detection center.

Kingsley faced the others. "Okay, there were obviously two reasons for them doing that. One was reconnaissance; they wanted to know how many we would send, and who. They probably wondered if we'd take the kids. The second was to annoy us, throw off our sleep schedules. We can probably expect more of this, tonight and future nights."

One of the Aurors spoke, a middle-aged man named Mark Tarman. "And we can expect this to continue until we catch one of them."

"That's right," confirmed Kingsley; from his and the others' expressions, Harry gathered that Tarman's comment had

been rhetorical. "The problem with that, of course, is that while most of the time it'll be only one, we always have to assume that it could be a bunch, so we have to go at least ten at a time.

"They're trying to take back the benefit we got from the ARA, people," Kingsley continued, now sounding more like he was making a speech than conducting a briefing.

"They're trying to get back the ability to Apparate, and make our lives difficult in the process. We've got a fight on our hands, and we've got to win it. We've got to work on our response times, get them even lower. I know, we all know, how hard it is to get out there fast enough to catch someone before they can take a Portkey away. That's our one advantage: they can Apparate to draw us there, but they can't get away by Apparating after that. They have to reach or Summon the Portkey and take it away before we can get there. If we get out there really fast, we could get lucky, and find someone who didn't Apparate as close to the Portkey as they intended. I'll be setting up schedules for drills, probably do that tonight while we wait for the next Apparation. As long as this lasts, there's going to be ten of us on ready status, and ten on standby, at all times. So, half of us will be night shift, and half, day. I'll put up the groups as soon as they're ready. We're going to get them, everyone. We can do it."

Aurors broke off into small groups or pairs and started talking among themselves. Hermione, Ginny, and Neville approached Harry. They exchanged glances, all understanding the seriousness of the situation. Ginny asked, "What did he mean by response times? Is it the time it takes to respond to an unauthorized Apparation?"

Harry and Neville nodded. "The Auror-level standard is two seconds," Harry explained, "though I think most of them can

do better than that. It's not a matter of how fast you can get there, because that's instantaneous, but how fast you can identify the location well enough to go there. It's going to be harder for us than for them, both because they have much more experience Apparating and because they've done these drills many times."

Kingsley had walked up to them as Harry finished speaking. "I think you'll all do fine with more practice," he assured them. "I wanted to let you know what I have in mind for you four. As you heard me say, there'll be four shifts of ten, and I'd like each of you with one shift. Harry and Ginny, I'd like you on the midnight-to-noon shift, and Neville and Hermione, noon-to-midnight. For each twelve hours, six will be spent here on ready-to-go status, and six on standby, during which you could be relaxing, or doing response-time drills. And you should relax sometimes; this could last a while, and twelve hours a day is a lot. If any of you, at any time, needs some time off, let me know." He looked around, and saw that no one was likely to take him up on the offer. "Okay, then. Neville, Hermione, go home and get some sleep, and come back tomorrow at noon. Harry, Ginny, you'll stay here until noon. Whichever of you isn't on ready status can join the drills, as soon as we get them set up.

"And, a couple of things... first, I know none of you has that much experience Apparating, and I don't want you getting down on yourselves if you can't manage two seconds anytime soon; Aurors are experts at this sort of thing, we have to be. Just do the best you can, treat it as a skill you're trying to learn. What's important is that you get out there in time to protect the others, which you will, even if it takes you an extra second. And second... thank you for doing this. You don't have to, and we all appreciate it." He made eye contact with each of them in turn, then walked off.

"It looks like we two won't be seeing much of you two for a while," said Hermione to Harry and Ginny. She and Neville said goodbye, and headed for the fireplace.

Harry looked around the large room, watching the scene. There were magically displayed maps of Britain, and maps of London and other major cities, on all the walls. Aurors were walking in and out of the room, or talking in groups of two or three; the sense of mission and determination was palpable. Harry found that he hoped he would be on standby rather than ready status at first, so he could start doing drills. He wanted to help the situation be resolved, and, he admitted to himself, to prove himself to the Aurors. They had spent a lot of time training him, and he wanted to help in a tangible way.

He and Ginny found two chairs together, and sat down to wait to find out who would be on ready status and who would do drills. They held hands, holding them low so as not to be too conspicuous. Harry looked at Ginny, and they exchanged support and love with only their eyes. "It's not watching the sunset," he said after a minute, "but at least we get to do it together."

"I'd rather do this with you than watch the sunset, or do anything else, alone," she replied. Harry nodded, once again feeling grateful to have her. They looked at the maps, and waited.

There were two more unauthorized Apparations that night. The first had occurred at 2:02; the next two were at 4:04 and 6:06. After the third, in which no Death Eaters were sighted, it was widely assumed among the Aurors that the times were being chosen to taunt them. The Aurors were primed and ready at 8:08, but nothing happened, then or until the end of Harry and Ginny's shift.

They came through the Burrow's fireplace a few minutes after noon. Ron and Pansy were sitting on the sofa, arms around each other, when they stood after hearing the noise in the fireplace. "Bet you two are pretty tired," said Ron sympathetically. "I heard you only got a couple hours' sleep."

"Yeah, doing these shifts, I might have to take up coffee," said Harry with a small grin for Ron, reminding Ron of a joke he had made a few weeks before.

"Cool robes," said Ron. "The Aurors gave you those, I assume?"

Harry nodded. "When we go out on a call, the Aurors don't want us looking obviously different from them. They're afraid it'll make us better targets."

"Hermione told us all about what happened," added Pansy. "Did anything else happen after she and Neville left?"

They all walked into the kitchen, sat down, and Harry and Ginny took turns telling the story as they ate. "So, we got in a few hours each of response-time practice, but other than that, nothing much," concluded Harry. "It's funny... I usually see the Aurors when they're not on duty, they're pretty relaxed people. But right now, they're deadly serious. For obvious reasons, of course. They may be busy, but nobody's forgotten about Teddy and Anna."

"I must say, I'll be glad when this is over, and not just for the Aurors' sake," said Molly, looking like she wanted to adjust Harry's hair or clothes, but refraining. "I don't like you two doing this. I know why you are, don't worry, I'm not starting that again, I just can't help it." Harry started to mentally dismiss Molly's concerns, then had a sudden thought: he wondered how he would feel if he were a parent and a child

of his wanted to do something like that. He then wondered if the fact that he was now with Ginny, and that they had ideas of having children in the future, had prompted the thought.

"I know, Mum," said Ginny. "I will too. But you'd be doing this too if you were me."

"I wish I could be," said Ron, in what was obviously understatement. "And since you four are on different shifts, we can't have any sessions until this is over."

Harry tried not to smile, and wasn't completely successful. "Well, nothing says there have to be six. You two could have your own energy-of-love sessions."

Molly and Ginny stifled their giggles, as Pansy laughed out loud. Ron gave Harry a long-suffering look. "Oh, good, Harry. Very subtle."

"I don't think he was trying to be," pointed out Pansy, now amused at Ron's discomfort. She held his hand for a second, then ran her hand up his forearm. "It's not a bad idea, really."

Ron looked at Harry accusingly. "This is all your fault."

"Really?" Harry asked, as if surprised. "I'm not the one touching your arm."

"Thank goodness for that," put in Ginny.

Ron ostentatiously changed the subject. "Well, I guess we're going to have to be pretty quiet around here for a while. With you two on this shift, you'll be sleeping most of the afternoon and evenings. Hope you aren't light sleepers."

"We'll work something out," said Molly. They chatted more and finished eating, then Molly asked Ron and Pansy to leave so she could talk privately to Ginny and Harry. They looked mildly surprised, but did so.

Molly faced Harry and Ginny, her expression serious. "This is about how you're going to sleep. Ron had a point, which I'd already thought of as soon as Hermione told us what happened. The fact is, we could probably be quiet enough, but it would be a real effort, not to mention that Ron and Pansy would be shut out of their rooms all day. They could get by, but the bottom line is that given what you're doing, your sleep is very important right now. Someone could make an accidental noise, wake you, and you might have a hard time getting back to sleep, and then you'd have a hard night with the Aurors. You'll be in danger, and you have to be alert.

"So, I think the best solution is for the both of you, as long as this goes on, to sleep in Harry's quarters at Hogwarts." Ginny and Harry raised their eyebrows and glanced at each other, but had no other visible reaction. Molly remained serious as she continued, "You know I'm not trying to encourage you, and my daughter's already made it clear that you need no encouragement. This has nothing to do with that. You need a place to sleep where you won't be disturbed, and Hogwarts is perfect. I've already called Professor McGonagall to explain the situation and what I had in mind. Now, there are other possibilities; for example, she asked me if I was sure I didn't want to have Harry in his quarters and Ginny in her Gryffindor dormitory, or a guest room. But you two can already do what you want, so there would be no point to that. And since you're committed, it would seem unfair to separate you like that just because Ginny's underage. You deserve to be treated like adults, given what you're doing."

Ginny's expression was as serious as her mother's. "Thanks, Mum. We appreciate it. Obviously, in other circumstances I'd be thinking all kinds of things, but right now I'm just thinking about sleep, and I'm sure Harry is too. It was really nice of you to do that for us." Harry nodded his agreement.

"Well, it just makes sense," said Molly, seemingly satisfied that they were taking the situation seriously. "You two can go on upstairs, get whatever you need from your rooms, and go ahead. I know you're tired."

They thanked her again, headed upstairs, and went to their respective rooms. They met in the hall, Fawkes appeared, and they were soon standing in the bedroom of Harry's Hogwarts quarters. Harry put down his bag and sat down on the double bed, then she sat next to him. "Funny," he said, "I imagined what it would be like the first time we got to sleep in the same bed, but it wasn't anything like this."

"I'm glad I wasn't the only one imagining what it would be like," she replied, smiling mischievously. "I've imagined it quite a bit, actually." Now Harry smiled in embarrassment as he wondered if she meant what he thought she meant. "But, yes, it was nothing like this, and we are tired, so that sort of thing will have to wait. Never thought I'd hear myself say that," she added, almost to herself.

She rolled over to the other side of the bed and lay down, and Harry lay next to her. After a minute of silence, Ginny said, "Suddenly, I'm very tired. I was going to change, but I don't think I'll bother. I feel like I could drop off whenever I wanted."

"Well, I have to do my Occlumency exercises, but I'm sure I won't be far behind," said Harry.

She rolled onto her side to face him. "I love you, Harry."

"I love you, too," he answered. She smiled, kissed him, then rolled onto her other side, facing away from him. A minute into his Occlumency exercises, he heard her breathing loudly, obviously asleep. Five minutes later, he was as well.

Harry slowly awakened, and the first thing he noticed was Ginny, still sleeping, lying on her side so that she faced him. In his hand he had watched her sleep more than once, but this was the first time he'd seen it face to face. He wanted to touch her, but was conscious of waking her up. He didn't want to move, for the same reason, but he had to use the bathroom, so he reluctantly got up. When he came back, she was still asleep, but she stirred awake as he lay down on the bed again. She looked up at him and smiled. "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty, so we slept almost seven hours," he answered.

"Probably enough," she said. She moved closer to him and put her arms around him. "Suddenly I don't feel like going back to sleep, anyway." He smiled and kissed her, then she kissed him, more aggressively. After they broke apart, she touched his face and said, "And now, I feel like getting into the water again."

Harry grinned, remembering the swimming pool analogy he'd used the last time they were there. "Do you think the water will be okay?" he asked, wanting to know if she would feel comfortable doing anything, considering his memories could be viewed later by Snape.

"Only one way to find out," she replied, and kissed him again. The kiss lasted for over a minute, and Harry found that his desire to keep going was beginning to outweigh his concern that what they did might be seen. They finally broke

apart, and she smiled at him again. "You seem pretty enthusiastic."

"I suppose I am," he agreed.

"Well, that's good, I like you that way," she said teasingly. "I have to go to the bathroom, unfortunately, but I won't be long." She kissed him again, then got up.

He lay back on the bed, thoughts competing for attention in his head. He thought for the first time since waking up of the Aurors, of the challenge that they faced. He thought about Ginny, about how lucky he was to have her. He thought about Dumbledore, with whom he had not talked during his sleep for the first time since Dumbledore had died; Harry assumed that it was because in the current situation, he needed all the sleep he could get. He looked around the room, remembered that he was at Hogwarts, and wondered how he would teach a full schedule and study as well next term. Most of all, he wondered what would happen when Ginny returned. He recalled that in the most recent nighttime conversation he had with Dumbledore and the 'other' Snape, Snape had told him that his physical counterpart planned to avoid viewing sexual memories indefinitely while Harry adapted to the situation, and that the knowledge that he could do so if he chose was more important than actually doing so. Harry hadn't had a chance to tell Ginny about the conversation, and decided to do so when she returned.

Ginny came out of the bathroom, and took a few steps toward the bed; he was sitting on the edge, waiting for her to sit next to him. She stood a few feet away, looking determined and a little nervous; Harry wondered if he was imagining it, as she was normally far less reserved about anything intimate than he was.

"Remember what you said about getting into the water a little bit at a time?" she asked. "Well, one thing you need to know about me is that I'm not a very patient person." She moved her arms and shoulders, and the Aurors' robes fell to the floor; Harry gaped in astonishment as he took in the fact that she was now wearing nothing. "I decided to jump in the deep end," she said.

Harry just stared for a few seconds, so surprised that he was unable to do much else. Although still nervous, she was amused at his expression. "I've never seen you look quite like that before. I hope it's because you like what you see."

He knew that to say that he liked what he saw would be a vast understatement. He recovered from his shock enough to realize that she was nervous, and probably very uncomfortable. He stood and walked to her. "I love what I see. I've never seen anything more beautiful."

She beamed and kissed him. "I think that's the first time you've ever used that word to describe me. I think you just want to encourage me to do that more."

"That would be good," he agreed. "But I meant what I said." Conscious of how exposed she was, he unbuttoned the top few buttons of his robe, lifted the front, and draped it over her as he moved closer. They were now both covered by his robe, their heads barely fitting through the top. He took his arms out of the robe's sleeves and put his arms around her under the robe, and she put hers around him. They held each other for a few seconds, then he met her eyes and said, "I didn't think I'd ever feel so proud, and so excited, both at the same time." He realized that what she had done had had the effect she clearly hoped it would; he now didn't care who saw what from his memories later. What inhibitions he had felt were gone.

"Well, I'm very glad about both of those, but right now, the second one especially," she said happily.

He smiled. "Not only that, but... it's like what people said about me last year, about saying Voldemort's name. You inspire me to follow your example," he said as he moved his arms under the robe to try to remove his shirt.

She stopped him, holding his arms in place. "Oh, no. No, this is my reward for doing what I did. I get to do this."

Very pleased at her attitude, he stopped moving. As she started, he had a sudden thought. "I forgot to ask, did you ever go to St. Mungo's?" The only answer he got was a smile.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 3, No Longer At Bay: Neville suffers a pair of devastating blows; Rita Skeeter, spoiling for revenge against Hermione, finds just the right moment to strike back, causing additional misery and sending Hermione veering between despair and fury.

From Chapter 3: "It's hard for me to think that right now," said Hermione. "I'm too worried... and when I'm not thinking about that, I find myself imagining all kinds of grisly ways Skeeter could die. My favorite right now is, getting stepped on. Either as a beetle, by me, or as herself, by a giant. Either would be okay. I mean, you know me, Harry, I'm not a violent person. I was sad that Goyle died. But this is just so... sick, especially after what happened. The timing was no accident, I'm sure of it. To do this to someone who suffered what Neville did is just depraved. Morally speaking, she's no different than a Death Eater to me."

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

No Longer At Bay

Harry and Ginny walked through the Aurors' fireplace at a quarter to midnight and walked through the compound to the Apparation detection area. They found Hermione in the large room adjacent to it, and sat down near her. "Hi there," she said. "I'm on standby, obviously, I just finished some drills. Did you two get enough sleep?"

"Yes, thanks," answered Ginny. "Mum had us sleep at Hogwarts so we wouldn't be disturbed."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "I actually thought of that, but I didn't want to suggest it to Molly. I'm glad she did it." She looked at them appraisingly for a few seconds, then broke out into a broad smile.

Harry felt his cheeks flush. "What?" he asked, more defensively than he intended.

"I don't think you really want me to answer that, Harry," said Hermione, still smiling. "You're practically glowing, both of you. I'm really pleased for you. And also impressed, since I know what you had to get past."

"That was mainly her doing," said Harry, looking at Ginny. "People say I'm brave, but she's every bit as brave as I am, more so in some ways."

Ginny shrugged. "I don't think of it as being brave, so much as... extremely lustful."

Embarrassed again, Harry said, "I'm just glad Molly didn't take one look at us and know."

"Are you kidding, Harry?" asked Ginny, surprised. "Of course she did. I think you were just avoiding eye contact with her. That probably told her as much as anything else. She gave me a few looks, I could tell she knew."

"How was she about it?" asked Hermione.

"It wasn't like she was pleased, but she wasn't bothered either," said Ginny. "The only reason she accepts the idea at all at my age is because it's Harry. I think it was kind of like, 'well, I knew they would.'"

"Did you eat at the Burrow, or at Hogwarts?"

"At Hogwarts, since we didn't want to bother Mum so late, though we knew she wouldn't have been bothered. But we thought, well, there's all those house-elves at Hogwarts with nothing to do, so... it was funny, Harry summoned Dobby with his dog. When he got there, Dobby was practically wetting himself with pleasure at being summoned by someone as brave, noble, generous, awe-inspiring--"

"He had a few words for you, too, as I recall," interrupted Harry, hoping to derail Ginny.

"Yes, apparently I'm quite a wonderful person in my own right," acknowledged Ginny, "but I'm pretty sure that I'm just basking in Harry's reflected glory. Also, I'm a Wheezy, and we had the Joining done, so with all that I must be pretty incredible. Anyway, Harry had him bring us some food, and within ten minutes there's a table all nicely set up, a candle and everything, and enough food for five people. I was thinking, I could really get used to this."

"Well, you could, if Harry ever asks Dobby to be his house-elf," suggested Hermione. "Of course, adjusting to all that praise all the time would be a bit hard on Harry..."

"We'll have plenty of time to think about it," said Ginny. "So, any more Apparations today?"

"Yes, two," answered Hermione, turning serious. "One with me on ready, one with Neville. Both were the usual, someone taking a Portkey away. They almost got the one I went out for; Dawlish made it out there in just over a second, and just barely missed whisking away the Portkey before the Death Eater could grab it after Summoning it. He was really mad, he was so close."

"I can imagine," said Harry, knowing how he would feel. "How's your time coming along?"

"My best so far is two point two seconds, which I'm told is very good, for my level of experience. Neville managed two seconds once, so we're both doing okay. I doubt either of us is going to be the one to catch anyone, though."

"You never know," said Harry encouragingly. "I'm hoping to get out there fast enough to catch one, anyway. I'm going to ask Kingsley if I can do a few hours of extra practice before tomorrow's shift."

"Don't bother," she advised him. "Neville already tried, and Kingsley said no. Gave Neville a little lecture about pacing himself, how there won't be any off days, and so forth. And he's right, of course."

Harry had to admit to himself that it made sense. "Oh, well. Guess I'll do the best I can in the time I have." They heard the chime indicating it was time for the shift change, and headed into the detection room, passing and saying hello to

Neville as they did. They looked at the list on the wall and saw that from midnight to three a.m. Harry would be on ready status and Ginny on standby, and it would switch every three hours until the end of their shift. Harry mentally prepared himself to Disapparate at a second's notice, and started studying maps.

A little over an hour later the alarm sounded, and Harry instantly looked up at the large wall, on which three maps instantly appeared. The first was of Manchester, the city that was the site of the Apparation; the second, a more detailed and closer view of the area, and the third, a very close view of the target area. Each map had a rapidly blinking red dot indicating the exact spot of the Apparation. Harry took in the information as quickly as possible, and Disapparated.

Just as Harry Apparated he heard a loud thwack, followed instantly by a shriek. His eyes tracked a body flying through the air away from them, but what he quickly focused on was what had sent the body flying: a giant.

Harry felt a flash of fear that a dozen Death Eaters wouldn't have caused; there was something about the sheer physical impressiveness of a twenty-five-foot tall person that caused him to quail. He looked around, and the Aurors were reacting quickly, shooting off Stunning spells. He heard Kingsley say, 'Imperio,' and he wondered if it would work. He was trying to decide what spell to use when the giant shouted something Harry didn't understand, and wound up for another swipe of his hand. "Back off!" shouted Kingsley, and everyone including Harry Apparated thirty to fifty feet away, so as to be well out of range... or at least a few giant steps, Harry quickly calculated.

More Aurors started Apparating in; it had to be the standby shift, but Harry didn't see Ginny with them. "Everyone,

together, now!" shouted Kingsley. "Avada Kedavra!" shouted twenty voices, startling Harry further. He watched the green bolts head for the giant, and hit him. The giant swayed, looking like he might topple. Despite being well out of range, Harry nonetheless prepared to Disapparate if necessary.

"Again!" shouted Kingsley, and they sent another twenty Killing Curses at the giant. He swayed again, and this time toppled over. Harry wondered if he was dead yet. Kingsley apparently was not wondering, as he had the Aurors fire yet again. Is that really necessary? wondered Harry, who then remembered that giants were somewhat resistant to magic. He recalled that four Aurors had not been able to take down Hagrid with Stunning spells, and Hagrid was only half-giant.

A few Aurors approached the prone giant. One stopped at the neck, checking the carotid artery for a pulse; another leaned across his face to put his hand in front of the giant's nose, checking for breathing. They walked over to Kingsley. "It's dead," one Auror reported.

Kingsley nodded. "Go to the Ministry, have them start waking people up. This has to be gone before sunrise." The Auror Disapparated. Kingsley addressed the Aurors, saying, "Tonks, Jack, Diana... go find the body, see what if anything we can learn from it, who it was."

Tonks and the others appeared far less than thrilled to be given the task. "If there's anything recognizable, which I doubt," muttered Tonks as they headed off.

"Everyone else, back to headquarters," said Kingsley. They started Disapparating, and Harry did as well.

He had barely registered his new surroundings when Ginny ran up to him and hugged him. "Oh, Harry, thank

goodness... they said there was a giant, and I shouldn't go... I wanted to anyway, just to make sure you were okay."

"I'm okay," he assured her. "They killed him. Twenty Killing Curses, three times."

Kingsley walked up to them as they separated. "Are you wondering, Harry, why I found it necessary to do that?"

Harry thought for a second, and realized that he had been, but understood quickly once he thought about it. "You're responsible for everyone's life here."

Nodding solemnly, Kingsley said, "I had a feeling you'd understand that, given your experiences. You haven't had to kill, but you've been responsible for others' lives. Yes, that's part of it. The other part, the part you might not understand so easily, is that it's a message to the Death Eaters: that we're not playing with kid gloves, that they take chances with their lives when they fight us. That doesn't mean that we'll kill indiscriminately, or if we don't have to. But giants are tough, and not killing that one would have been taking a big chance, one I wasn't willing to take. If there's doubt as to whether it's necessary, that's the choice I'll make."

"I suppose I can understand that, too," said Harry, wondering if he could make the same choice, to order a person or creature killed when there was some doubt as to whether it was absolutely necessary. "I assume Ginny wasn't sent because her role is to protect from Killing Curses, and that wasn't going to be an issue here?"

"Yes," agreed Kingsley. "I didn't specifically order that--there wasn't time--but it was the right choice. We could all have easily been killed if that giant had done what he was supposed to do. I mean, it's not hard to guess what happened. The giant was told to whack us all away when we

Apparated, but he jumped the gun—giants aren't all that swift, mentally—and did it to the Death Eater who Apparated to lure us there instead of us. If it had been done right, we wouldn't have had time to get out of the way, and most of us would have died. Basically, we were lucky. We don't know how many giants they have, but now they have one less." He walked away.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look. He said, "Let me tell you... I've seen enough that not that much scares me anymore. But... that, that scared me." He mimed looking straight up, indicating without words what was necessary to see a giant.

"You may be Harry Potter, but you're still allowed to be scared," she said, taking his hand momentarily. She mouthed 'I love you,' which he did as well. He went back to looking at the wall and concentrating, and she to her drills.

The next two days passed without incident or progress. Death Eaters Apparated five to seven times a day, day or night, always to a Portkey which they took to get away. Harry's response times improved to the point where he was averaging one point five seconds per response, a tiny bit better than the Auror average. He had a close call in which he barely missed a capture, as did some Aurors, but they failed to catch anyone. The Aurors' sole solace was that they knew the Death Eaters were taking a lot of time to fly to the sites in advance to set up Portkeys, and so were devoting almost as much effort to the fight as the Aurors were. Harry wondered if either side would give up if the stalemate continued for any length of time, but he knew they faced one deadline: the start of the next Hogwarts term on the third of September. He and his friends had to return to Hogwarts, and would not be able to provide protection past that point.

He wondered, too, how long he and the others could continue to put in twelve-hour days. He didn't mind the time and effort it took, but he knew that the continuing stress of being ready to Disapparate at a second's notice for six hours a day couldn't be sustained indefinitely. Kingsley had already approached them to suggest that they take turns taking a day off while another was on ready status for twelve hours instead of six. No one took him up on it, but he let them know that there would come a point when he insisted on it. Harry annoyed Kingsley by pointing out that he also hadn't had a day off since the crisis began; Kingsley responded by pointing out that he had been doing his job for longer than Harry had been alive, and so had excellent conditioning. Harry didn't argue further, but still had no intention of taking a day off.

At nine-thirty on Sunday night Snape signaled Harry to request a meeting, the first time he had done so for almost a week. Harry assumed that Snape had held off at first because of the Auror situation and its demands on Harry's time, but that Snape's needs could not be put off indefinitely. The session lasted an hour and a half, a little longer than usual, which Harry assumed was because it had been a longer time between meetings than usual.

Ginny had already gone back to the Burrow, and he joined her when he was finished, at a little after eleven. Fawkes brought Harry into the living room, as usual, but to Harry's surprise, everyone was in the room: Arthur, Molly, Ron, Ginny, and Pansy. He knew that Arthur and Molly might wonder where he was when he was having sessions with Snape, and that McGonagall had told Molly that Harry was at those times doing something important which couldn't be revealed.

Harry looked at them, a questioning expression on his face. Ginny gestured him to the spot on the sofa next to her. As he sat, Arthur spoke. "Something happened earlier today, Harry. Cornelius Fudge is dead, assassinated."

Stunned, Harry said nothing, processing the information. After a minute, he said, "By Death Eaters?"

Arthur nodded. "Almost certainly. The assassin Disapparated after he did it. Of course, this prompted the Aurors to Apparate to where the assassin went, but apparently he got to the Portkey before they could catch him. They think he was using Polyjuice Potion, and that's how he was able to get close enough to do it. He impersonated a friend of Fudge's."

Molly voiced the thought now on Harry's mind. "As we've already told Ginny, Harry, the last thing you should be thinking right now is that if you'd only agreed to protect him, this might not have happened. He was protected, but obviously things can go wrong. You or Ginny being there wouldn't have totally protected him, just from Killing Curses; there are plenty of other ways to kill someone. If they were determined to kill him, they were going to get him."

"At least the next person to take the job is going to really understand the risks," commented Ron. "Oh, and Harry, there's an interesting twist to this, one that's not so good for us. When he was attacked, Fudge was doing that interview with Rita Skeeter. The assassin tried to kill her, too, but just as he fired the Killing Curse at her, she transformed into a beetle. It saved her life, but now she's out in the open as an unregistered Animagus."

"Which means," continued Ginny, "that Hermione could be in trouble. She has no more hold over Skeeter. I guess we're

going to find out whether she was right about whether what she did was illegal or not." Harry assumed that the Weasleys had been filled in about what Hermione had done to Skeeter.

"I would never bet on Hermione being wrong," said Ron.

"True," agreed Ginny. "And nothing may happen, anyway."

"Something will happen," said Pansy, sounding very sure.

"Remember what I said from when I saw her talk to Hermione in the fireplace. She hates Hermione. She's going to find some way to stick it to her. I'm sure of it."

"I don't know what she can do," argued Ginny. "She can accuse Hermione publicly, but between Hermione doing what she did against Voldemort and helping the Aurors now, she's going to have some good will to draw on. Nobody's going to be eager to harass her, except Skeeter."

"Oh, and Harry, Archibald called a few hours ago," said Arthur. "He wanted you to know that you should feel free to call him to talk to him about this; he offered to come over if you wanted. He also said that you shouldn't think about blaming yourself."

Harry found that he wasn't sure what he thought. "Obviously it's hard not to think about it that way a bit," he said, partly thinking out loud. "But another way to look at it is that we're taking risks, bigger risks, for the Aurors—not so much because we like them more than Fudge, but because they're out there protecting people, enforcing the ARA, and sometimes getting killed, like Teddy and Anna. Fudge may have been a target, but it just seemed like he wasn't doing anything that made him worth protecting, or more worth it than anyone else. I'll accept the risk to Ginny in doing what we're doing, but I find I don't regret that I wasn't willing to risk her safety for his."

"I feel that way too, Harry, of course," agreed Molly. "That doesn't mean his death isn't a tragedy, even if he was a... well, anyway..." she trailed off uncomfortably, not wanting to speak ill of the dead.

"I guess, thinking about it, I don't especially blame myself," Harry concluded. Looking at Ron, he continued, "And you have a good point. He chose the position, and it's always going to have risks." He was comfortable with how he felt, but he couldn't help wondering how he would have felt, or what he would have done differently, if the Minister of Magic had been Dentus, or someone he had liked. Then he reminded himself that Dentus wouldn't have made the request of him, and probably would have refused the help if offered.

A half hour later, Harry and Ginny walked into the room where the standby Aurors relaxed and did response-time drills, and found Hermione sitting in a chair near the door.

She greeted them. "I suppose you've heard about Fudge, and Skeeter."

"You worried?" asked Ginny.

Hermione shook her head dismissively. "She can't do anything to me. I have a feeling she'll try, but the worst she can do is try to drag my name through the mud. And considering what her status is now—she's going to be up on charges, the Aurors are sure of it—I don't think anything she says will be taken so seriously. I'm much more worried about catching Death Eaters than I am about her, believe me."

Harry found that he had no trouble believing it; he just hoped she was right. They talked until midnight, and passed Neville as he left the ready-status room. "Oh, Neville," said

Harry. "I forgot earlier to say Happy Birthday. Not much of a seventeenth birthday, was it?"

Neville shrugged. "Could be worse. Cassandra made sure everyone knew, so people were saying it all day, and they had a cake for me during my first standby shift. My birthday isn't usually much anyway, and at least I got to be with people this way. I'm not complaining. Anyway, thanks."

They continued in; Harry was on ready status, Ginny on standby. Harry yet again focused on and studied maps. Pretty soon I'll have the whole map of Britain memorized street by street, he thought. He wondered how close to that the Aurors came, since they had to be ready to go anywhere.

A little over an hour into his shift, Harry looked up to see Kingsley rush into the room. He shouted into the standby room, "Ginny, get in here!" She ran in, looking at Harry quizzically; Harry's face indicated his own puzzlement.

Kingsley was talking mainly to Harry and Ginny, though all the Aurors were listening. "Something's happened to Neville and Hermione. They're not wearing their pendants." Harry knew that the Aurors would know this immediately, since the pendants were hooked into the same detection system that worked for the Aurors.

"Where are their pendants?" asked Harry, his insides suddenly churning with fear.

"At the Longbottom home," Kingsley replied. "We're about to go there, but we have to do it together, since it could be another trap. Everyone ready?"

As everyone nodded, Ginny whispered urgently, "You have to take me, Harry, I've never been there." Harry moved

behind her, put his hands on her shoulders, and Disapparated, as did the others.

The house was dark. Aurors immediately started using their wands as flashlights; one Auror found the lights and turned them on as others fanned out across the house. Harry knew the search wouldn't take long, as the house was small. Kingsley walked over to the table and wordlessly held up two pendants, one blue and one orange. Then they heard a noise from an adjoining room, and an Auror came out. "We found Mrs. Longbottom. She's dead."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look of sorrow for Neville, and there was an explosion in the fireplace. Ron came charging out, followed by Pansy, both in their pajamas. "I called them on my pendant when we got here," said Ginny to Harry. To Kingsley, who looked at her disapprovingly, she added, "I knew they'd want to help."

"Of course we do," said Ron, with a defiant look at Kingsley. "They're our friends too. Any news?"

"Neville's grandmother is dead," said Kingsley, and Ron and Pansy had much the same expressions as he and Ginny had had. "We have no idea where Neville and Hermione are, and no way to find out. Their adrenaline alarms didn't go off, so they had to have been taken by surprise. The obvious guess is that the Death Eaters killed Mrs. Longbottom, one of them used Polyjuice Potion to assume her identity, and fooled both Neville and Hermione long enough to knock them unconscious. We have to start looking, but unfortunately even though it's only been a few minutes, they could be almost anywhere by now, if they carried them off on brooms or took a Portkey."

Harry's heart was racing, though he barely noticed it. "I can find out where they are," he said, as Fawkes materialized. "Fawkes can know, he'll take me to them. You go back to Auror headquarters, you can get my location from my pendant, and come in force."

Kingsley nodded. "You understand, Harry, that they could be in a nest of Death Eaters. There could be thirty or forty."

"I don't care if there's a thousand," said Harry, staring at Kingsley.

"I know, I just wanted to be sure you're ready. Okay, we'll only be a few seconds behind you."

Fawkes stuck out his tail feathers, and as Harry reached for one, so did Ginny. "I'm going with you."

"So are we," said Ron, as he reached for part of Fawkes' tail as well. Pansy put an arm around Harry's shoulders, and he held onto her.

Fawkes, to Harry's surprise, did not move. Harry looked at Fawkes, trying to rein in the urge to shout, so badly did he feel the need to get moving. Fawkes turned his head and regarded Harry, obviously trying to communicate. Harry took a deep breath, and tried to clear his mind so he could understand. "What's going on?" asked Ron. "Why isn't he going?"

After a few seconds, Harry answered. "He says, only me." To the others' surprised looks, Harry tried to explain. "He doesn't know where they are, I think. He has to take me somewhere, it'll make it easier to find them, I'm not sure why." He looked at Kingsley. "Fawkes is going to take me somewhere, but not where they are. The next place he takes me, after that, will be the place. When you see me go there,

send everybody." Turning to his three friends, he said, "After Fawkes takes me to where they are, he'll come right back here for you. Be ready." They nodded, and let go of him and Fawkes. Fawkes took flight.

They appeared in Dumbledore's quarters; Harry found himself standing in front of one of the chairs in which he and Dumbledore had sat last year. He looked up at Fawkes. "Is it something that's here? Something he has? What am I supposed to do?" He felt nearly panicked, imagining what was being done to Neville and Hermione as he sat there.

Fawkes fluttered down to the arm of the other chair and started singing. Harry suddenly realized that what Fawkes wanted at the moment was for him to calm down, to feel peaceful, as that was the usual purpose of the song. He focused on calming himself down, tried to focus on love. In the urgency of the moment he found it very difficult, but as he did, he started to understand why Fawkes had brought him there. He wasn't sure if he was realizing it himself or if Fawkes was telling him, but he knew. Fawkes could locate Neville and Hermione because they were close to Harry, but it required concentration, and was difficult. Fawkes couldn't find them at the moment because Harry's emotional state was interfering with Fawkes' ability to concentrate to the degree necessary. Harry understood that the faster he calmed down, the faster he would reach Neville and Hermione.

He took several deliberate deep breaths, and tried to sink into the feeling of love as intensely as he had done last September. Images of Neville and Hermione in distress came into his head, and he did his best to dismiss them. Focus on love, he thought. He calmed himself, focusing harder.

After what Harry thought was about two minutes, Fawkes flew into the air, his tail facing Harry. Still focusing on love, Harry grabbed the tail, and they were gone.

They materialized outside, in what looked like a rural area, though Harry spared no time to look at his surroundings. Neville was lying on the ground screaming, clearly being tortured. Hermione was frantic, then startled as she saw Harry and Fawkes. Wand already out, Harry instantly summoned his shield, and it surrounded Neville, who stopped screaming. Fawkes disappeared. Harry then summoned Hermione's wand, directing it toward her; she grabbed it and turned to face the Death Eaters. The Death Eaters started firing spells at Harry and Hermione, who focused on warding them off as Aurors started Apparating all around. Fawkes reappeared, carrying Ron, Pansy, and Ginny. He started singing as they let go of him and started firing on Death Eaters.

Taking a better look around now that he personally was no longer under dire threat, he saw that there were about twenty Death Eaters. Aurors continued to Apparate in; Harry realized that it must be all forty, that Kingsley had called in the ones who were off shift and had probably been sleeping. Seeing an opportunity, Harry looked for Voldemort. He found him, behind a group of Death Eaters. He quickly put up an anti-Disapparation field, hoping it would work. We outnumber them, Harry thought, we could get Voldemort now, with Albus's help.

He saw the Killing Curse shield go up around one Auror, then another; he realized that Ginny and Hermione were focusing on the battle, casting the spell where needed. He saw Neville get up, and he summoned Neville's wand over to him. Neville caught it, but didn't acknowledge Harry. He ran over to the battle, near where Bellatrix Lestrange was

dueling with an Auror. As soon as he got close, Neville raised his wand and shouted, "Crucio!" Lestrangle screamed, fell to the ground, and continued screaming. On Neville's face, Harry saw a look that he never would have imagined. He would have sworn that it was not really Neville, that something was controlling him.

The Death Eaters fell back into a circle as Lucius Malfoy cast what looked like a gold circle around them; all were contained within it except Lestrangle, and two others who had fallen. Malfoy reached into his pocket, and in an instant, everyone in the gold circle was gone.

It was suddenly quiet, except for the sound of Lestrangle screaming. "Neville, stop!" shouted Cassandra. Focusing on Lestrangle, Neville ignored her. Harry briefly thought of putting up his shield around Lestrangle, and realized he couldn't bring himself to do it, feeling that Neville, however irrationally, would see it as a betrayal.

Hermione ran over to Neville as Cassandra shook him. "Neville!" she screamed. Cassandra grabbed his wand arm and yanked it upwards; Lestrangle stopped screaming. Neville turned on Cassandra furiously. "I wasn't finished!" he shouted in rage.

Hermione looked at him sadly. "You were never going to be finished, Neville," she said quietly. "You could do it for days—"

"Not days," Neville replied, still shouting, but a little less loudly than before. "Just an hour. Just an hour," he repeated. Harry looked at Ginny and Ron, and they at him, with deep sadness, as they understood that Neville had been hoping to inflict the same fate on Lestrangle that she had on his parents.

Lestrangle was regaining her breath. "You should have let him continue," she said scornfully. "He might get good at it someday. He's not, now."

Fury flared on Neville's face again as Cassandra held onto Neville's wand arm to restrain him. "Don't tempt me," she shouted at Lestrangle. Without a word, Kingsley raised his wand and shot off a Stunning spell. Lestrangle lay flat on the ground, unconscious.

"Well, we'd heard enough out of her, that's for sure," said Kingsley. "I assume they're just unconscious?" he asked, gesturing to the other two Death Eaters on the ground. A nearby Auror nodded. "We all okay?" he asked, and got another nod. "Okay, everyone start heading back. Cassandra, you and Tonks help Neville."

"Me too," said Hermione, as Aurors started disappearing.

"Soon, Hermione," Kingsley assured her, "but first we need to know what happened. Let's go back to headquarters, and we'll sit down and you can tell us. Then you can go be with Neville." He picked up Lestrangle, and none too gently swung her over his shoulder.

She reluctantly nodded, as she put an arm around Neville. Having largely calmed down, Neville put his around her, and leaned over and whispered into her ear. She glanced at him, then nodded. "Okay, we're ready," she said.

"Fawkes'll take you," said Harry to Ron and Pansy. He prepared to Disapparate as everyone else started doing so, and saw Fawkes appear before Ron and Pansy just before he disappeared.

Harry and his friends formed a loose circle soon after their arrival at Auror headquarters. Hermione again put an arm

around Neville, who saw Kingsley approach and asked, "How soon can I get back to it?"

Trying to avoid looking incredulous, Kingsley spoke solemnly. "Not for some time, Neville. I know you want to help. But Aurors have to be in control emotionally at all times. What you just went through, most people wouldn't wish on their worst enemy. You need time to recover from it."

"Come on, Neville," said Cassandra gently. "Come with us."

"But they need me! Me and the other three--"

"We'll be all right, Neville," said Harry, as encouragingly as he could. "We'll get by. We can do eight-hour shifts with no standby, something like that. It'll work."

"He's right, Neville," said Kingsley. "Having one of you on standby is a luxury, not a necessity. What's important now is you getting better, and that's going to take time. Cassandra will help you, she'll be there for you. We all will, we'll all help you."

Neville was staring straight ahead, as if still unable to grasp the idea that he couldn't go back on duty right away. Cassandra said, "Let's go, Neville. You'll stay here tonight, there are some nice guest rooms. We'll help you get set up." He finally nodded. With an arm around his shoulder and Tonks following, she led him away.

Kingsley walked to a meeting room, Harry and the others following. "Do you want to tell us, or show us in a Pensieve?"

"I'd rather just tell you, if that's okay," she said, and Kingsley nodded. Still emotional from her ordeal, she calmed herself and began her story. "I had just gotten into bed when Neville called me on my pendant. I got up and went to the bathroom

because I didn't want to disturb Pansy. He sounded... not agitated, but unusual. He said there was something important that his grandmother wanted to talk to us about, and that I should come right over. To tell you the truth, right then I felt like there was something wrong; I couldn't say what, but it just didn't feel right. It seemed strange. But it was nothing I could put my finger on, and he seemed to think it was important, so I put on some clothes and took the fireplace over.

"His grandmother, or what we thought was his grandmother, had us sit down at the table. She seemed to be acting strangely, too, but I just put it down to the idea that she was going to tell us something important. We were sitting there, and she got up to get something. She was behind us, and that's the last thing I remember from there. She knocked us out, I don't know how.

"The next thing I knew, we were in the place where you found us. I assume it was Fawkes that found us?" Harry nodded. "Thank goodness for Fawkes," she said, shuddering. "If not for him..."

Harry didn't want to think about that. "Come to think of it, why didn't they think of that? Didn't they know enough about phoenixes to know that Fawkes could do that?"

"No, Harry, in fact, I was surprised myself. It says in Reborn From the Ashes that a phoenix can do that for someone's spouse, but it says nothing more than that. They had reason to think that as long as they didn't take Ginny, they wouldn't be found. So either Fawkes is unusual, or the bond you have with the rest of us is unusually strong." Harry knew which one he thought it was.

"Anyway, they woke us up. There were about twenty of them, and of course they had taken our wands. Voldemort said something about how good of us it was to join him, that kind of stupid thing, being sarcastic. Neville said, "You've made a big mistake, Voldemort. Aurors are going to be arriving any second now." Voldemort said, "Are they? Without your pendants? They must be very impressive Aurors indeed." Neville looked down and touched his neck; he hadn't realized our pendants were gone. Most of the Death Eaters laughed, and then Bellatrix Lestrange took a step toward him. She said, "Longbottom, you have been around Potter too long, you've picked up his bad habits. We do not say the Dark Lord's name. And if we do..." and then she did the Cruciatus Curse on him. It was horrible. I don't know for how long, maybe ten or fifteen seconds. It was all I could do not to plead with her to stop, I know that would've really entertained them. She stopped it, and Neville was gasping, trying to recover from being Cursed, you know how that is, right afterwards. She said, 'Now, what do we call him?' And Neville—I still can't believe he did this—looked up and said, 'Asshole.'" Hermione looked uncomfortable repeating the word.

Everyone else's eyes went wide, including Kingsley's. "Wow," said Ron, looking amazed, "that's very... un-Neville-like."

Hermione nodded. "I thought so, too, but I think I understood what he was thinking. They had already killed his grandmother, and the situation we were in... I thought we had no hope, that it was just a question of how much we were going to have to suffer before we died, or that we might end up like his parents. That thought scared me, but then I remembered where his parents really are," she glanced at Harry, "and I wasn't quite so scared. But I'm sure he thought the same thing, and I think for him it was like

you see it with you and Voldemort, Harry. They were going to torture us no matter what, so I'm pretty sure he just decided, the hell with it, we're dead anyway, so I'm going to say what I want. I was really proud of him, even though I was practically hysterical, watching him suffer like that.

"Well, you can easily guess what happened next, of course. When they got over their shock at what Neville said, they did the Curse on him again, and let it go for a long time, I'd say about two minutes." Harry saw Pansy shudder. "I was trying so hard not to react, and probably doing a really bad job. They knew how it would affect me, and they were smiling while watching Neville scream. At one point I looked over at them, and I saw Malfoy with them. He just smiled and raised his eyebrows, like he was saying, 'remember me?' I was so furious..."

"Finally, they stopped. Voldemort said, 'Bella, where is your sense of fair play? Let's see what he can do with his wand.' She threw his wand to him. He picked it up, but could really only get to his knees, he was still weak from the Curse. Lestranger said, 'Well, Longbottom, let's see... I drove your parents insane, killed your grandmother—the Dark Lord, kind as he is, allowed me the privilege—and now I can make it a clean sweep. But should you join your parents or your grandmother, that's the question...'" Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry, this is hard to say all at once. That people can be so inhuman, so despicable..."

She paused for a minute, trying to hold back tears, then continued. "She said she heard Neville could do your new spells, and she wanted to see them for herself. Then she did the Curse again, and even though he had his wand, he couldn't bring up the shield, and it hit him. They all laughed, and somebody said, 'Potter should have given him more lessons.' She whisked his wand away, then Voldemort looked

at me. He said, 'First, Mudblood, there is a little business to settle from last month, for your disrespect.' Then he did the Curse on me, I'm not sure for how long. Then he asked me what I had done that day, what my role was in what happened. I said I didn't remember, although I knew he would know I was lying. He said that Neville would suffer until I changed my mind. Neville yelled, 'Don't tell-' and he was interrupted by the Curse, but I knew what he wanted, of course. I knew it was like I said before—we were going to die, it was just a question of when and how. I had decided I wasn't going to tell them no matter what, but watching Neville, I was starting to weaken. Then I realized that Voldemort could take it from me using Legilimency anyway, and he was just doing it that way for entertainment, to see how long I'd watch Neville suffer before I broke down and told them. I was just opening my mouth to tell them when Harry and Fawkes appeared. I was so relieved, it was like one of those Muggle movies where the cavalry comes over the hill. Not even so much that I wouldn't have to tell them what I knew, of course, but so Neville wouldn't have to suffer anymore... it was so horrible."

Harry was suddenly aware of how much effort it had been for her to tell the story while keeping control of her emotions. She looked at Kingsley and said, "Is it all right if I go see Neville now?" He nodded, and she got up. Ron, sitting next to her, got up as well, and reached out to hug her. She fell into his arms and started to sob; he held her and tried not to do so himself. After a minute, she thanked Ron, and left.

Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Pansy all exchanged glances, all very emotionally affected by what their friends had suffered. Kingsley spoke, addressing the practicalities of the situation. "Obviously, Neville's going to be out of action for a while. At least a few weeks, probably more. If an Auror went through what he did, they'd probably be off for a month.

"Unfortunately, much as we all care about Neville, we still have to keep dealing with this Apparation problem. Also, I don't want to make any assumptions about Hermione's status. She went through a lot, too, and might need some time, though if she says she can return soon I'll be inclined to accept it. But we have to work out what to do in the meantime. Harry, you and Ginny may have to just do twelve-hour ready status shifts for the time being." They nodded, indicating that it was no problem.

Ron spoke up. "The last time we were tested was three weeks ago," he pointed out. "It's not impossible that Pansy or I could have reached 100 by now and be able to do the spells. It's worth checking."

"I'm not thrilled at all with the idea of Pansy going out on calls," interjected Harry. "I mean, the whole point of her being at the Burrow—"

"You think I like it, Harry?" Ron challenged him. "I don't, I really don't. But we've talked about it—we've had a lot of time for talking over the past few days," he said, as Harry realized this was Ron's way of expressing that he and Pansy hadn't felt very useful, and wanted to be doing what the others were doing. "She really wants to do this, and I have to accept that, even if I don't like it."

"Look what just happened to Neville and Hermione, Harry," Pansy pointed out. "I'm certainly not in any worse danger than that, or than you if you got captured. I know what could happen, but I'd be surrounded by ten Aurors. It just doesn't seem that likely that anything would happen. But even if it was more likely, I'd still want to do this."

Harry was silent, unhappy but understanding her reasons. Kingsley nodded. "I was going to suggest testing you two,

actually. I, we, appreciate your desire to help." He made eye contact with both, making the point that he was grateful even if they turned out not to be able to do the spells. "Let's do it now. Ron, you first."

Kingsley stood and put the measuring spell on himself. "Harry, a test, please?" Harry fired Blue, and as expected, a gold 100 hung in the air for a second, then vanished. Kingsley gestured to Ron. Ron had his eyes closed, obviously concentrating. Then he opened them and fired at Kingsley. A gold 99 hovered in the air. Ron winced, his disappointment and frustration obvious. "Don't be discouraged, Ron," Kingsley advised him. "That's progress from last time. Just give it more time, it looks obvious that you're almost there. You'll get it." Harry caught Ron's eye and nodded, hoping to reinforce Kingsley's thought.

Pansy stood and gave Ron a short kiss before taking position in front of Kingsley. She too concentrated, then fired, and was rewarded with a 100. She smiled and made a brief gesture of triumph.

"Okay, Pansy, looks like this means you're in," said Kingsley. "We're going to want you for noon-to-midnight, the one we lost Neville from. I know that after what just happened you may not be that tired, but you need to try to sleep. We'd like you here by noon, but more importantly, I don't want you here until you've had six hours of sleep."

"And one other thing... I hate to do this, but we have to be 100% certain that you can actually do the spells."

Pansy nodded slowly. "I knew that. I'm not looking forward to it, but it's a small price to pay for being able to do this."

"Are you sure you know exactly what to do, Pansy?" asked Harry, concerned.

"Yes, I've heard you describe it lots of times, I know what to do." She concentrated, obviously summoning feelings of love. "Ready."

Kingsley counted down and fired the Cruciatus Curse. The familiar shield came on, but as expected, a small portion broke through; Pansy screamed and fell to the ground. After Ron helped her up, she asked Kingsley to do it again, as had Neville and Ginny. He did, and the shield blocked the spell completely.

"Okay," said Kingsley. "If Hermione's back for the noon shift, we'll train you to Apparate and work on your response speed. If she's not, one of us will escort you if we get a call. After what happened, I'm hoping for a quiet night, or even that they'll give up. They lost three people tonight, and I don't think they have that many. But of course, we can't assume anything." He stood, indicating that the meeting was over. "Harry, Ginny, if you'd go out and take your positions. Ron, Pansy, get some sleep."

They headed out. Ron intercepted Harry and quietly said, "Would you stop by the Burrow before you go to Hogwarts? I want to talk to you."

"Sure," Harry agreed, wondering what it could be. Walking out to his post, he thought of what had happened to Neville and Hermione, and hoped he'd have a chance to catch someone.

The night was quiet, however; there were no Apparations from midnight to noon for the first time in a week. Harry wondered if this meant they had given up, but he doubted it. On their way out, Harry and Ginny passed Pansy, who assured them that she'd had enough sleep.

Back at the Burrow, Ginny went to talk to Molly while Harry went upstairs to look for Ron. He was in his bed, but obviously awake. Harry sat down on the edge of his, facing Ron. "When did you get to sleep?"

"About five, I think." Ron rubbed his eyes, trying to wake up. "We sat downstairs talking for a few hours after we got back. It wasn't like we were going to get to sleep soon anyway. We talked about what happened to Neville and Hermione, about the energy of love business, lots of stuff. I told her what I was going to ask you. She thought it was a good idea, although she was surprised I would do it."

Harry smiled a little, wondering if Ron was deliberately trying to keep him in suspense. "Maybe I will be too, if you tell me what it is."

Nervously, Ron looked at Harry. "You know I want to do what you guys are doing. You can probably guess how badly I want to do it, and that I was very unhappy that I'm stuck at 99."

"We don't know that you're stuck, Ron. This is the first time it was measured at 99. You could still be getting better."

Ron shrugged. "That could be, but somehow I don't think so. I've thought for some time that the reason that you four could do it and we couldn't was that you were couples, you were in love. Pansy and I were heading in that direction, just not quite there yet. Or we were there, but hadn't said anything. But now we are there... and, you know, it's great, I've never been as happy as I am now. I thought that with that, we both would be able to do the spells, to get 100. But, as you saw... I'm really afraid that that's as high as it's going to get for me, that there's something stopping me. I know you might say it'll just take longer for me, because of how I

am, that it was hard to get used to this kind of thing. But I just don't think so. I've focused hard on love, I've said and thought things I never thought I would. I think I've gotten rid of that, but something's still stopping me.

"So, this is what I was thinking. I know you don't know everything about this, that you're still learning too, but you know more than anyone. You were able to show them how to do it, even though you didn't exactly know how to show them. If there's an expert, you're it. And now you're becoming a Legilimens, you can pull out thoughts and memories. I want you to... do Legilimens on me, to look around. I want you to try to work out why I can't do this, if there's something stopping me."

Harry looked at Ron in astonishment. His first thought was, wow, he really wants this badly, to ask this. After he took a few seconds to take in Ron's request, he said, "Ron, I'm not even sure I know what to say. I mean, first of all, are you sure you really know what you're asking? I mean, I could see--"

"You could see anything that's ever happened to me, no matter how embarrassing or private," Ron finished. "Harry, I know what this involves. I'm not ignorant about it. Hermione's told me what it's like, and that she trusts you. You should know I trust you too."

"I know that, Ron. But it'll be different than with Hermione. With her, I deliberately focus on love, happiness, things like that. If I do this, I'll have to look around at different things, and maybe the negative ones more than the positive ones. I could find stuff that you've forgotten, that you shut out because it was painful."

"I didn't know you could do that," said Ron, raising his eyebrows a little. "But I don't care." He stared at Harry,

determined.

"You also understand that not only might it not work, but I'm not even sure what I'd be looking for. It would have to be a kind of thing where I know it when I see it, and maybe not even then. I might even have to deliberately call up things that are secret or embarrassing, because something like that is more likely to be the thing stopping you, if there is anything I can see."

Ron sighed. "Yes, Harry, I get that. I'm not saying I think it's going to be a barrel of laughs. But unless you tell me I'm going to suffer permanent brain damage, I'm not changing my mind. Like I said, this is you, you know how I feel about you. Or, you're going to very soon, anyway. Do you think I'd ask just anyone? Do you think I'd let someone like Snape tromp around in my mind, to dig stuff up? I know what I'm doing."

Harry had to try to keep a reaction off his face, amazed as he was that Ron had stumbled onto the very thing that was happening with him and Snape. He looked at Ron, and realized he wasn't going to be able to talk him out of it.

"All right. I assume you want to do this now?" Ron nodded. "Okay, hang on..." He raised his left hand and looked into the palm. "Ginny, I'm going to be a while longer with Ron, I'm not sure how long. Could be as much as an hour."

"Okay," he heard her reply in his head. "What's going on?"

"I'll explain later," he said, putting his hand down. To Ron, he added, "I'll tell her what I did in general, not the specifics, of course." He got out his wand. "Oh, before I start, let me just make sure of something. Have you told Pansy you love her?"

"Yes," replied Ron.

"Would you say you're 'in love' with her, not just that you love her?"

Harry felt that Ron had to push back embarrassment for a second before he answered. "Yes, I'm in love with her."

"Have you told her that?"

Ron thought. "No, not exactly like that. Do you think I should?"

"Well, yes. Not only so you can get 100, but also just because it'll make her happy. But it also depends on your reason. If you're not saying it because you're embarrassed, then you should say it. If it's because you're not sure she feels exactly that way about you and you're worried about getting hurt, that's different. The reason is important. I mean, last September, I told Hermione and Ginny that I loved them. The only reason I didn't tell you was that you would have freaked out."

Ron chuckled at the thought. "Yeah, that's about right. But would you have really thought it was necessary?"

"What I thought was necessary was that I'd be willing to say it, or rather, that embarrassment wouldn't stop me from saying it, even if something else would. I felt like I had to totally accept it and not be embarrassed by it, since at first, the whole thing embarrassed me. We've talked about this in the sessions, of course. I don't know that it would be like that for everyone, only that it was for me."

"I understand," said Ron. "So, let's get started."

"Okay. I think at first, I'm just going to do the basic stuff, like I do with Hermione, just to... I don't know, get a feel for your

mind. Doing this with Hermione felt different than with Albus. Once I get a feeling for it, then I'll start looking."

Ron nodded, and Harry started. Calling up feelings of love, he found that thoughts and memories of Pansy predominated, followed by ones involving Hermione and himself, and his parents, especially Molly. He then called up feelings of pride or accomplishment, and found roughly what he expected: memories of winning the Quidditch Cup in fifth year and sixth year, winning the chess match against the board on the way to the Sorcerer's Stone, being named Quidditch captain and prefect.

Harry now struck out in random directions, wanting to see if he got lucky in finding something before looking in specific areas. He discovered that he was already familiar with most memories that came from after they met, but that they had a different feeling and emotional content, since they were Ron's, not his. Doing this, he found nothing that he thought might be important.

He looked now for happy memories in general, with no particular theme, and the fourth one that came up, to Harry's surprise, was Ron watching Harry in the first task of the Triwizard tournament. He felt Ron's happiness for him, but then felt Ron's embarrassment at feeling he'd been irrational in being angry with Harry and helping cause their argument, mixed with a feeling of inadequacy, of feeling he wasn't as good as Harry at most things, and would never be. He felt Ron struggle to put those feelings aside and be happy for Harry, and decide to apologize.

Harry retreated from Ron's mind. "Funny... I hadn't thought that this could be kind of awkward for me, as well as you. I'm sorry, I didn't know you felt that way."

"That's because you've never been Harry Potter's best friend," said Ron with a wry smile. "So you wouldn't see it that way. But yeah, that was almost a perfect example, even not thinking about the argument we'd had. I was happy and impressed that you flew so well, but I couldn't help thinking, 'I couldn't have done that well.' It's hard not to at least think that. By the way, is this relevant to what you're looking for, or--"

"No, I just stopped because I was surprised, I didn't know about it. But you're right, if I stop every time something like that happens, we could be here all afternoon."

"Yes, and I have a feeling my sister has plans for you. Good thing for you I can't peek into your memories."

"You'd definitely find some stuff," agreed Harry. He continued looking, and found that he unconsciously returned to the theme of Ron feeling inadequate. The first memory to come up was of when he had told Ron that a dream was of him trying and failing to stop a goal because he was angry with Ron and Hermione pressing him to do Occlumency more. He felt Ron's anger and shame, more intense than Harry had expected due to the Quidditch-related stress Ron had suffered for much of his fifth year.

He again stopped his search. "I'm really, really sorry about that," he said. "It was not only nasty, but not true. I was dreaming of getting past that door, and I knew I shouldn't, so I was probably nastier because I knew you and Hermione were right and I didn't want to be reminded of it. Anyway, especially seeing it from your side, I feel awful about it. I'm sorry."

Ron nodded. "It's okay, I understand. The way I was doing at Quidditch must have made a pretty tempting target. It's

funny, probably we'd feel a lot differently about a lot of things if we could see them from the other person's side, like you are now."

"I'm sure of that," agreed Harry. "In fact, that's one of the things Albus has talked about at night. He hasn't done this yet, because it doesn't happen until you go to the spiritual realm, according to him, but he said that after we die we examine our lives kind of like this, but we see everything from the other person's point of view, and we feel how they felt. He said it's kind of part of our education."

"I'll bet a lot of people would act pretty differently if they knew that, and believed it," commented Ron. "Can you imagine what that's going to be like for someone like Voldemort?"

Harry shook his head. "Don't want to think about that, really. He'll be there a while, that's for sure."

He continued searching, but found nothing that seemed useful. He decided to try specific types of searches, starting with the idea of feelings of embarrassment connected to love. He found that Ron had felt acutely uncomfortable, more than he had let on, when they had started having the energy-of-love sessions, and that it had been an act of will to choose to take part in them at all. He investigated more closely, and found that Ron had had feelings, even recently, of discomfort with the sessions, as though the sessions were silly and he was humoring the others by taking part.

Harry stopped. "I think this could be significant."

Ron looked doubtful. "Well, I don't really feel like that. I know that it's a good thing to be doing, I know it makes sense, that love is important. It's only a very small part of me that ever thinks that way, only very occasionally.

Sometimes you think things you know aren't right or true, but you think them anyway."

"I know that, but there's this feeling I get... it's like, you have those feelings because there's some part of you that's still embarrassed about the whole thing. Like, if anybody but the other five of us could see what you were doing, what they would think. You don't really think it's silly, but you do get embarrassed, and it's like, that kind of thought is a place you go in your mind sometimes when you get embarrassed. Like a safe place, to escape the embarrassment, so you don't have to feel it. I can totally understand it, but I do think it could be interfering with your progress. Maybe only a little, but in this situation, maybe a little is all it takes."

Ron slowly nodded. "So, what do you think I should do?"

Harry thought about it. "I guess, try not to have that thought anymore. If you feel embarrassed, don't run away from it, just let yourself feel embarrassed."

"I've already done that plenty, believe me," Ron put in.

"I'm sure you have," said Harry. "I guess I'm saying you should do it all the time, not run away even once. Don't let there be any place in your mind where you stand back and look at it from a distance. If you feel yourself going there, come back, and... embrace the embarrassment, I guess. That's what I'd suggest. I can't be sure, of course, but I think it could help. It's just a feeling I get."

"Okay, then I'll do that," Ron agreed. He was still very serious, and it again struck Harry how badly Ron wanted this.

Harry started searching again, and after ten minutes, found something else he thought might be important. After coming

across a memory about Umbridge, he decided to look for memories of violence and aggression. A minute later, he found something: he saw Ron using the Cruciatus Curse on Malfoy, torturing him. Surprised, he stopped searching.

Ron spoke before Harry could. "How can you see that?" he asked, puzzled. "That never really happened, obviously. It's just a daydream. Not one I'm especially proud of, of course," Ron continued, as he glanced down in embarrassment, "but I'm sure you can understand why I've had it, with what he did to Pansy."

"I can definitely understand it," he assured Ron. "To answer your first question, I'm not sure. I'm still kind of new at this, and I didn't know I could see things, images, that were just imagination. If I had to guess, I'd say it's because this one is very vivid, very important. I'd imagine it helps you deal with what he did to Pansy."

Ron nodded, clearly still embarrassed at Harry finding it, but making himself talk about it anyway. "I think I first had it the night it happened, when I sat up all night in the infirmary. When she told me what happened, I was just so... even 'furious' doesn't seem to be enough, probably mostly because I was starting to have feelings for her at that point. I think I first had that particular thought that night, and I think I had it most times I thought about what Pansy had been through. It was just too painful to think about what he had done without the idea that he would pay for it somehow." He chuckled ruefully. "Seems kind of pathetic when I really look at it, which I never had before. Let me ask you, Harry... you must have felt like this, too. You're very close to her, and you're the one she did it for. How do you not have thoughts like that?"

It was a good question, Harry thought. After thinking for a minute, he said, "I think at this point I just channel it differently. Like I said a while ago, the thing with Lestrage at the end of the fifth year kind of immunized me. Thinking about torturing Malfoy wouldn't help me at all. Some conversations I had with Albus about Voldemort, about evil, probably helped. People like Malfoy, their lives are so empty because they're full of evil. Love is wonderful, but they're never going to really feel it, and I feel sorry for them. I think at some point I started seeing evil as... like a force of nature, or something. Like being mad at a hurricane, there's no point. I think with her, I just focused on her, trying to help her, rather than being mad at Malfoy. After she showed me what happened in the Pensieve... it was a struggle to accept it, because she had done it all to save my life. I told her how much I loved her, how proud of her I was, and of course I gave that speech. That helped a lot; I felt like I had done what I could. I don't know if you could easily do the same thing; you haven't had the experiences I've had. I think it's harder to draw lessons that really sink in from other people's experiences than from your own. I mean, look at what just happened to Neville. He knew my experiences, but when the time came, it didn't help him. He had to go through it himself, just like I did."

Ron gently shook his head in sadness. "Poor Neville... what he went through was worse than any of us ever have, even you."

Harry nodded. "That's for sure. I don't know exactly what we can do to help him, but I know we will. I suppose it'll be Hermione most of all."

"Is he going to get in trouble for that? I mean, it is seriously against the law. When you did it, nobody else saw, but forty other people saw him. I was worried about that."

Harry shook his head. "No, I asked Kingsley about that during my shift. Aurors have a kind of a code, I guess you could say. They're very close, as you know. They take care of their own, and they judge their own. They would turn him over to the Ministry if he had done something really outrageous, and if he had done it with deliberate intent. But, as Kingsley said, he was acting out of blind rage, and he had plenty of reason. No non-Auror except for us will know what he did, and they'll take care of him. They're extremely sad for him, just like we are."

"That's good, I'm glad they feel that way about him," said Ron. "So, anyway, do you have any suggestions for this Malfoy thing? Do you think it's really important?"

"I'm not sure. It could be. My... intuition, which Albus is always trying to get me to use, says that it is. It seems very possible that you can't use the energy of love if you're harboring violent thoughts and desires. I mean, I hope you never have to learn this lesson yourself, like I did, like Neville will. I'm very sure that Neville will end up feeling worse for what he did, not better. Maybe you can learn from us. Imagine how you would feel after you tortured Malfoy. You would feel empty, like I did. Doing that just feeds rage, makes you more like them, which is why Lestrangle wanted me to do it more, wanted Neville to do it more. It would hurt you, and it wouldn't change what Pansy suffered, wouldn't help her. You'll be a better person, better able to help and support her, if you can somehow set that aside and become the kind of person who wouldn't torture anybody, or even want to—even if they deserved it. I'm not saying it's easy, but it's the only answer I can think of. Remember what Albus said last year—what we do to others, we do to ourselves. If you can think of it that way—and I do think it's true—it may help you to not feel that way."

Ron nodded thoughtfully. "Okay, I understand. Well, that gives me a lot to think about, which is good, because I have lots of time. Do you think we should do any more, or do you think that's enough for now?"

Harry shrugged. "I suppose you never know what you might find, but these two things seem pretty likely, and I'm not sure how many things you could work on at once anyway. Probably stopping now is a good idea. We can always try again if it doesn't work."

Ron nodded, and they stood. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

"No problem," said Harry. He turned to leave, and was almost out the door when he heard Ron say, "Um, Harry..."

He turned and saw Ron looking down nervously, in what appeared to be serious embarrassment. Ron opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, and it suddenly dawned on Harry what Ron was going to say. Harry had to squelch an impulse to say, 'It's okay, I understand,' as he realized that Ron needed to prove to himself that he could do this. With great sympathy for what Ron was trying to do, Harry kept his face as expressionless as he could. No jokes, no smiling, he told himself.

Finally, Ron spoke. Looking alternately down and at Harry, he nervously said, "Look, I know you know this already, but... I love you." Now Ron smiled in embarrassment, and Harry allowed himself to smile as well.

"I know, I love you too," replied Harry with some embarrassment. "And don't worry, I know why you said it. I'm impressed, you didn't work up to it, like trying it with Ginny or your parents. You did the hardest one first."

"Just decided to jump in the deep end, I guess," said Ron, and Harry was startled that again Ron had by chance used a phrase significant to him. "Besides, either you can do it or you can't. If I was going to deal with the embarrassment, it might as well be now. Ginny, Mum, and Dad will be easy now." Now, Ron smiled again, though not from embarrassment. "It was very hard not to make a joke about it, but I felt like it wouldn't count if I did."

"I can understand that," said Harry. "I thought of one, too."

"What was yours?" asked Ron.

Smiling, Harry said, "Mine was, 'now, when you say that, do you mean you're *in* love with me, or...'" He trailed off as they both burst out laughing.

"That's a good one," chuckled Ron. "Mine was, 'of course, I know there are things that Ginny can offer you that I can't...'" They laughed again, then Ron added, "Yours was better, though."

Harry shrugged. "Lots of possibilities for humor in there. Good thing Fred and George aren't lurking with a pair of Extendable Ears, we'd never hear the end of it."

"No way would I have even had any of this conversation if they were in the house at all," said Ron emphatically. "Good thing they're so devoted to the shop."

"Well, I should get going," said Harry.

"I'm going downstairs too, still haven't eaten," said Ron, following Harry out the door. They walked downstairs and, to Harry's surprise, saw Hermione in the living room. She, Ginny, and Molly were on the sofa, talking.

"Hermione!" said Harry. He sat on a chair next to her, and took her hand. "How's he doing?"

"Pretty bad, as I was just telling them," said Hermione, not looking too well herself, Harry thought; she was as shaken and depressed as he had ever seen her. "It would be bad enough if it were only his grandmother being killed, or only the thing with the Death Eaters, but for both... well, he's a mess, of course. He was going to try to go to sleep when I left. I hope he can, he'll need it. This is going to be really hard for him."

"And for you, too," Ron pointed out. "You didn't exactly have a picnic."

"So much more happened to him that I don't think about what happened to me so much," said Hermione. "I just spent most of the night trying to help him... by the way, Harry, I don't know if you know this, but Fawkes showed up and sang for a while. I think it helped both of us, it was sweet of him. And of you, since I know he wouldn't do that unless we were both people you felt very close to. Not to mention, finding us and saving our lives."

"I'm glad he did that, well, both of them," said Harry. "He really is a comfort."

Molly got up and headed to the kitchen. "There's not that much more I can tell you," Hermione continued. "I just, you know, tried to comfort him as best I could. Cassandra did too, she was in and out. There's only so much you can do, though."

"I know what you mean," agreed Harry. "When I—"

He interrupted himself as several owls flew into the room, each one dropping a letter into their laps. With a quizzical

look at each other, they opened the letters as the owls flew off. Harry's contained no salutation or signature, and simply read: 'In your fifth year, your friends Ron and Hermione talked about your behavior behind your back, in very uncomplimentary ways. They wondered if the Prophet was right in what it said about you. What do you think?'

Harry looked up at the others, amazed. "What in the hell...?" he said to himself, as the others wore equally shocked or upset looks. "Are all of yours like mine? Saying you guys said nasty things about me?"

"Not nasty, in my case, but... something like that, yes," said Ginny, looking angry and confused. Harry and Ginny exchanged letters; Ginny's read, 'You should know that Harry thought about Pansy for a girlfriend before he picked you. He told her, but he didn't tell you. He must not have thought you could take it.'

They switched back as Harry said to Ginny, "It's not a lie, strictly speaking, but this makes it sound bad, which it really wasn't." Hermione took Harry's letter as he took hers; Ron clearly didn't want anyone to see his letter. Hermione's said, 'You might want to take a break from self-righteous crusades for a while. Harry and Ron were just humoring you by signing your O.W.L. petition, and a lot of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were angry with you for risking their O.W.L.s. They didn't say anything because they were afraid of suddenly getting bad cases of spots, like the "sneak." And the house-elves at Hogwarts even dislike you! "She is nosing into our business..." "She thinks we is stupid, that we doesn't know about her silly hats..." When you can't even get house-elves to like you, honey, you know you have problems. The trials of always being right, of always knowing better than others. Life is so hard.'

"Hermione's is the longest, that's for sure," said Harry. "But who-"

Hermione gasped. "It's Rita Skeeter, it has to be. She called me 'honey' once, and who else could get this kind of information? She-"

Molly walked into the room, crestfallen, holding a letter. "What is going on?" she asked, looking at Harry. "Someone says that when Percy died, you and Ginny were talking to Fred and George about how you didn't really like Percy, that you didn't care..." She looked on the verge of tears.

Harry tried to keep down his mounting fury at what was happening. He knew the potential for emotional damage here was high; it was clear to him that whoever was writing the letters was putting events in the worst possible context. Making a sudden decision, Harry took out his wand. He approached Molly, silently erasing from her memory everything that had happened since just before getting the letter. As she suddenly looked blank, then confused, he took the letter and envelope from her, and put them and his wand into his robes. Then he hugged her and said, "I love you, Molly."

"Oh, Harry, thank you... I love you, too..." said Molly, looking pleased and a little disoriented. "That's strange, there was something I was going to say, but I can't remember... oh, well. I'm going to go upstairs, see you all later." She walked up the stairs.

He walked back to the others, who all wore stunned looks. "Are you crazy?" asked Ron in disbelief. "Do you know how illegal that is? Not to mention-"

Harry shoved the letter in front of Ron as Ginny peered over to see it. "Whoever's doing this is trying to hurt all of us, or

turn us against each other. I'm sorry, but I'm not going to see her hurt like that, not about this. She suffered so much already."

"And this would just open up the wounds again, and rub salt in them," said Ginny, having read the letter. "I think you did the right thing, Harry, reading this. This would have devastated her, and even us explaining how it really was wouldn't have helped much."

"The common factor," said Harry, "seems to be to take true events but twist them, making them look as bad as possible. Sounds like Rita Skeeter, all right. Not to mention that it explains how she knows all this." He read aloud the letter Ginny received, then said, "What actually happened was that when I saw Pansy's attack in the Pensieve, one thing she said to Malfoy when he asked her if I loved her was that she didn't deserve me, and never could. I didn't want her thinking that, so I told her that in the months before I fell in love with Ginny, I'd thought about the idea of having a girlfriend, and that I'd thought about Ginny, but also about her, the point being that I never thought she wasn't good enough for me. The letter makes it seem like I seriously thought about it, but it was just daydreams, and I only didn't mention it to Ginny because it didn't seem important. I just thought it was important for Pansy to know, so she didn't think I thought she wasn't good enough. I have a feeling that all these letters will be like that. Ron, what does yours say?"

Ron looked as though he was trying hard to keep his temper down. "You may as well see it, you already know," he said shortly. Frowning, Harry picked up the letter. It said, 'I think you may not know that Pansy has been... intimate with Draco Malfoy. Harry and Hermione know, but it seems like they didn't think it was anything that would concern you.'

Harry cringed and handed the letter to Hermione. To Ron, Harry said, "This is like the others, it's not as bad as it sounds."

"Did you see what that said?" Ron shouted. "How can that not be bad?"

"What is it?" Ginny asked, puzzled. Harry saw Hermione gasp as she read the letter.

Harry pulled Ron up from where he was sitting. "Come here, into the kitchen," he said, tugging Ron, trusting Hermione to explain to Ginny why she couldn't be told what was in the letter.

In the kitchen, Ron wheeled on Harry. "Okay, what is it? How can this be 'not as bad as it sounds?' It sounds pretty bad!"

Harry wished Pansy were there so she could tell Ron herself, but she was on duty with the Aurors, and Harry knew that Ron couldn't wait ten minutes, much less ten hours. "The letter makes it sound like it was something she wanted to do, which it wasn't," said Harry. "It happened the day after Easter vacation, the day Crabbe blew up. She was trying to get him to tell her how he was planning to kill me. He agreed to tell her, only if she let him... touch her," he said, hoping his tone indicated what he meant without his having to provide more detail. "So, that was her choice. Let him do that, and save my life, or not do it, and I'd die."

Ron stared straight ahead, his expression becoming anguished. He stared at Harry for a second, then slowly sat down at the table. "Why didn't she tell me?" he asked, his voice heavy.

"She didn't want you to have to know, to have to think about it. She wanted to spare you that. It wasn't that she

was ashamed of it. Her exact words to me at the time were, 'it was revolting, but I'm proud that I did it.' She was proud that she was willing to do something that disgusted her, to save me. And there's a part of me that wishes she hadn't done it, even given what would have happened."

Harry could tell from Ron's expression that he was no longer angry with Pansy, but his emotions were still in turmoil. "I can imagine how you must have felt, being the one she did it for. Why did she tell you?"

"I think it was more the whole thing that she wanted me to see, not only that. That just happened to be mentioned. Malfoy was outraged that she did that, for that reason. We think it was one of the reasons he tortured her so badly, he was furious at being fooled like that. As for Hermione knowing, she just figured it out; when Pansy signaled, Hermione saw them in a couples' place on the map."

"So, if she hadn't signaled, right then..." Ron trailed off.

"Harry, you know that daydream about Malfoy? It's coming back to me... and now, Rita Skeeter's in it too. Is this the part where I'm supposed to just think about love?"

"Kind of, I guess," replied Harry. "I can really understand why you're having those thoughts. But, yeah, I guess the thing to do is think about Pansy instead. Funny, I sort of feel... responsible, since I'm the one she did it for."

"I have to talk to her, Harry. I know she's on duty, but I have to talk to her."

Ginny ran into the kitchen. "Hermione just left. We were talking, and it suddenly dawned on her that Neville probably got one of those too. In his state..."

"Oh, my God," said Harry. "I hadn't thought of that. That's the last thing he needs right now. He probably has it already."

"Yeah, and given how much she hates Hermione, it's probably pretty awful," agreed Ginny. "We should get down there too, we might be able to help explain whatever it is. Neville won't know what it is when he gets it, or that it's deliberately distorted."

"Dammit," said Harry. "Okay, let's go. Ron, I'll replace Pansy for the time being, you can talk to her. Ginny, tell Kingsley what's going on, then see if Hermione needs any help with Neville." They headed to the fireplace.

Harry and Ginny walked into the Apparation detection room; Ron waited in the standby room, as only authorized personnel were allowed in the detection room. Harry thought that Kingsley might be off duty by now, but he was still there. Harry walked up to Pansy, who was studying maps. "Pansy," said Harry, "did you get a—"

She held up a letter of the same type as the rest had gotten. "What does it say?" Harry asked. She handed it to him silently, obviously upset. Harry read to himself, 'Hermione and Ginny don't think you can make it work with Ron.' He sighed with relief. "Thank God, it's not so bad. Listen—"

"What do you mean, 'not so bad?' What's going on, anyway? Who is this from, and why?"

"We think they're from Rita Skeeter, and that she's striking back at Hermione. We all got them. As for this, I was there when this was said, and it's not what she makes it sound like. They were worried that in an argument someday, Ron might, in a moment of anger, bring up your past, and it

could damage your relationship. They were worried about you, not thinking you couldn't make it work."

Pansy thought for a few seconds. "I suppose I can see where they might worry about that. It would be pretty bad, and I've wondered about it too. Everyone got them?"

"Yes, and the reason we're here is that Ron needs to talk to you. The subject of his is what you did for me that day, to get Malfoy to tell you—"

"Oh, no," said Pansy, looking stricken. "How did she know?"

"She's a beetle Animagus, Pansy, she can be anywhere. She must have been in the room and we couldn't see her. She made it sound much worse than it was, in the letter. I had to tell Ron what it really was right away, I'm sure he was imagining much worse things. He needed to talk to you, he's in the other room. I'll fill in for you, take as much time as you need."

"Thank you, Harry," she said, and rushed out of the room. Harry looked around and saw Ginny finish talking to Kingsley, then head out, he assumed to Neville's quarters.

Kingsley walked over to Harry. "Well," he said gravely, "it appears that what Hermione did with Skeeter was not the swiftest of ideas."

"Certainly seems that way now," agreed Harry, keeping an eye on the map board, trying to be ready to Disapparate at a second's notice.

"Now, how did she do this? She just hung around you and your group for two years, since Hermione caught her?"

"At least at some times, anyway," said Harry. "Some of the information is from two years ago, some from last year, even some from this summer. So, probably she was around at various times. We don't know how much. We don't know for certain that it was her, but Hermione's sure, and it makes sense."

"So, she could have been around at any point when you were in for training, she could have heard me telling you about the Auror code."

Harry nodded. "Yes, she could."

Kingsley took a breath. "That is... less than ideal. That is really not something I would like to see printed in the Prophet."

"I wouldn't think so," Harry agreed. "But now that she's known, is the Prophet really going to print anything she got while illegally being an Animagus?"

"Hard to say," said Kingsley. "They sometimes toe the Ministry line, but sometimes not when they get something sensational. I have a friend at the Prophet, maybe it's time to give him a call."

"Sorry about the disruption," Harry said, referring to his replacing Pansy. "We're just in kind of a crisis mode right now. Bad enough for this to happen anytime, but during this time, and with Neville and Hermione..."

Kingsley nodded, and walked off. After a little while, Pansy came back in. "Thanks, Harry, I appreciate it. We both did."

"No problem," said Harry. "Is everything okay now?"

"Mostly," she said confidently. "We still need to talk more-like, several hours, probably-but for now it's okay. I apologized for not telling him, I understand now I really should have. It's like what Ginny said to you once, that she wants to share in your life, both the good and the bad. Ron said pretty much the same thing, even though we're not committed like you are; he wouldn't want me to shoulder something like that alone, even if it would be hard for him to know. But he understands why I did it, and I know he doesn't have the impression that that bitch wanted him to have. Yes, I'm a little annoyed at her," added Pansy sarcastically.

"Hermione's going to be more than a little annoyed if what Skeeter wrote to Neville is as bad as I think it's going to be," said Harry. "I should go see how that's going."

"See you later," said Pansy as he walked off. As he passed Kingsley, Kingsley reminded him to get some sleep at some point. He found Ron, and they walked to where the guest quarters were. Once they got close, they were guided by the sound of loud crying. They entered a room and saw Ginny holding Hermione, who was clearly in the middle of a prolonged cry. She looked up at Ron and Harry as if to tell them what had happened, but started crying again instead. Ron sat down to hold her, and Ginny took Harry's hand and led him out of the room. They found a nearby room empty.

"I guess I don't have to ask if it was bad," Harry observed.

Ginny took out a letter from her robes. "This is the letter Neville got," she said. Harry opened it and read: 'You might not be aware, but Hermione doesn't like your grandmother very much. Not so long ago, she said, "I'll be happy when I don't have to worry about what his grandmother thinks anymore." Wonder what she meant by that... You see, Hermione always thinks she knows what's right, so she'll be

right there, ready to take over for your grandmother, telling you what to do. She also said, "Neville will be good once he's trained." How's the training going? And you know she's doing Legilimency with Harry, but you don't know that she's opening up your most private moments to him. He already saw what you did at the Burrow over Easter, and she's going to show him more. She could protect your privacy by putting those memories in the Pensieve, but she's not going to. It seems as though she doesn't have much respect for your privacy.'

He looked at Ginny glumly. "This is really bad, even worse than I thought it was going to be. That one about his grandmother... I can only imagine what he thought, especially in his state. I assume the quotes are accurate?"

She nodded. "I was there for both. They're exactly right, but again, taken out of context. When she said the one about his grandmother, we were talking about the idea of him moving out of her house, living by himself. You probably know that they'd been arguing about how he let his grandmother run his life, as she put it. Hermione was looking forward to his living on his own, so he wouldn't have to answer to her. But him reading that right now... he had to think she was looking forward to his grandmother dying. And the Legilimency thing, that's really bad too. What she said looks really bad if you don't know the whole situation, but she can't tell him the whole situation. How in the world is she going to explain that to him?

"Anyway, of course she was already with him when I got there, but it seemed to be going badly. He basically seemed to have shut down. I heard him saying, 'I can't deal with this, I can't deal with this.' Hermione was crying and trying to tell him what happened, but he just wasn't responding. Then Cassandra came in and gave him some stuff to get him to

sleep. Hermione was mad at Cassandra, but Cassandra did the right thing. She wasn't going to get anything coherent out of him; she's barely coherent herself. They've both been awake for about thirty hours, had trauma... and now this. When Hermione was crying just now, she managed to say that she was afraid that Neville would leave her. I really don't think he will, but I can see why she's worried. I would be if I was her."

"How much had they been arguing about his grandmother?" asked Harry. "I wasn't really aware of that."

"It wasn't terrible, but there had definitely been stress. Neville's plans always depended on what his grandmother would allow, which really frustrated Hermione. She said at one point, 'he's a few weeks shy of being an adult, but she still has him on a tight leash.' Glad Skeeter didn't throw that one in there as well. Hermione felt it wasn't healthy, that Neville should assert himself more. He's asserted himself in different ways over the past year that he hadn't before, just not with his grandmother. Hermione felt that he was so used to doing everything she said that he didn't think to question it, and she was afraid that nothing was going to change when he turned seventeen. And if nothing changed then, when would it? She was having visions of having to get his grandmother's permission to go on dates with him in five years. And I don't have it from his side, but I'm sure he was upset too. He probably felt that she was pushing too hard, or asking too much too soon. She was putting him in an uncomfortable position. So, it was difficult for both of them. Now, with his grandmother dying... you can just see him saying to her, the next time they argue, 'well, you got what you wanted, she's gone, you don't have to fight her anymore.' She obviously didn't want his grandmother to die, just to let go of him a bit, but it's going to be hard for him to

make that distinction, especially at first. It's going to be hard for them."

Harry shook his head sadly. "I wonder if she timed this deliberately, if she heard about what happened and rushed those letters out. It would be really cold-hearted, but it wouldn't surprise me."

Ginny stood. "Come on, let's go back and see how she's doing." They walked back to the room Hermione was in. She was talking with Ron, and looked up at Harry and Ginny. "So you saw the letter," she said despondently. "What do you think?"

Harry felt he had to be honest. "It's bad. But I don't think you're going to lose him. He just needs to recover a bit from what happened. He'll see things for how they really are, in time."

"It's hard for me to think that right now," she said. "I'm too worried... and when I'm not thinking about that, I find myself imagining all kinds of grisly ways Skeeter could die. My favorite right now is, getting stepped on. Either as a beetle, by me, or as herself, by a giant. Either would be okay. I mean, you know me, Harry, I'm not a violent person. I was sad that Goyle died. But this is just so... sick, especially after what happened. The timing was no accident, I'm sure of it. To do this to someone who suffered what Neville did is just depraved. Morally speaking, she's no different than a Death Eater to me."

Harry didn't quite see it that way—Skeeter had committed no violence, and probably wouldn't—but he could see why Hermione did, and had no inclination to quibble with her. "It'll be okay, Hermione," he said. "It's really hard right now,

but it'll get better. Come on, you should go back to the Burrow, try to get some sleep. Fawkes will sing to you."

Ron took Hermione's hand and helped her up, then put a comforting arm around her. They walked out of the room, headed for the fireplace.

It was almost three o'clock when Harry and Ginny finally made it to his Hogwarts quarters. Again very tired, they fell asleep almost immediately.

Harry found himself at the phoenix place, standing next to Dumbledore. "Albus! I'm surprised. I thought you weren't going to meet me while this Auror thing went on. I'm happy to see you, of course."

"Thank you, Harry. As I always am to see you. And I did not in fact originally plan to meet you, but circumstances suggested that it was a good idea tonight, or should I say, today. I personally will not have much to say, as I wish to keep the interruption of your sleep to a minimum. But it should not surprise you to learn that Esmerelda Longbottom is here, and has a few words to say to Neville."

"It does surprise me, I guess, because I hadn't thought about it," Harry admitted. "It was such a busy, and bad, day..."

"Very understandable, it was indeed trying. Before I summon Esmerelda, I sense you have a question. You wish to understand why I did not use my ability to incapacitate Voldemort during the confrontation, and perhaps facilitate his capture." Harry nodded. "The answer is, because it would have done no good. Had I done it before you arrived, the Death Eaters would simply have tortured Neville and Hermione for information as to how it happened. Had I done it after you arrived, it would have made no difference, as Lucius Malfoy was carrying the device which allowed their

entire party to escape. They would simply have carried Voldemort away. By the way, you should know that your anti-Disapparation field was successful; Voldemort at one point attempted to Disapparate, but failed. I suspect this means that in all such future confrontations in which Voldemort expects to have contact with you, he will carry some such device as to provide a certain means of escape.

"I will now summon Esmerelda. Please also convey to Neville my love, and that of his parents." Mrs. Longbottom appeared, wearing what Harry remembered as her normal clothes. Her face, however, was kind and gentle, not strict and forbidding as he was accustomed to seeing it.

"Neville, my darling... I am very glad to have this opportunity to say to you things I could not manage to say to you before. First of all, I love you. I did say that on occasion, but not nearly as often as I should have. Had I said that as often as I criticized you, and vice versa, I would have been a much better parent. But your parents were right when they said I did the best I could.

"I want to apologize for focusing my attention on such things as achievements, ability, family honor, marks, and so on, when I should have focused it on the kind of person you are, which I now understand is far more important. You are, and always have been, a very good person. I did not understand or recognize that as I should have. I also want to make sure you know that you should not consider yourself in any way responsible for what happened. I knew the risks, and I chose what I chose. Please do not spend any time thinking you could have or should have done something differently.

"I know that my presence in your life was too constricting; I did not allow you the kind of freedom you should have had.

We were both caught up in a dynamic that I created, but neither could escape. You were conditioned to seek my approval for things you need not have, given your age, and I wanted you to continue to do so. If Hermione and I have one thing in common, it is a tendency to think we are always right. It is a failing, both in her and in me. What has happened in the past day will give her the opportunity to see past it, if she can manage to do so. What Rita Skeeter did, and the timing, were not an accident. Things happen for a reason. You and Hermione have the chance to work out problems that you would have had to in the future, but with more difficulty then. Tendencies have not yet had a chance to become firm patterns, as they did with you and me.

"I know that you are not certain right now whether or not you will have a future with Hermione. You must make your own decision, of course. My advice to you, for what it is worth, is to stay with her. Mostly because you love each other, and partly because you will both have a chance to learn from this and change your behavior. Yes, you both; Hermione may be controlling at times, as I was, but you need not be controlled. You are a participant, you contribute to the situation. She is the way she is, and you are the way you are. She can change, and so can you. It will not be easy for either of you, but this is an excellent opportunity. Again, things do not happen by accident: there is a reason you two have found each other and fallen in love. You bring out in each other that which you need to change, in order to learn about yourselves and be happy, and love is a powerful motivation to do so. I know you both can do it; it is just a question of your willingness to make the effort necessary.

"What I want for you more than anything is to be loved and to be happy. You have it in your power to be both; the rest is up to you. I will be moving on to the next place now. You will

not see me again in this life, but you will see me again. I love you, and always will. Goodbye."

* * * * *

Harry woke up at a few minutes after nine. Ginny rolled over to lean against him and smiled in such a way that Harry knew what she was going to suggest before she did. "So," she said, raising her eyebrows a little, "how about going for a swim?"

Harry chuckled and wondered if that was what she was going to call it from now on. "I'd love to, of course, but we could have time problems. Professor Snape said last night that while this Apparation thing goes on, if he calls me, it'll be between nine-thirty and ten."

She looked at the clock. "Okay, so we have twenty-five minutes. Plenty of time."

He smiled and kissed her. "I'm really glad, and lucky, that you are the way you are about this. It makes it really nice."

"Being with you makes it easy," she answered. She kissed him, and they stopped talking.

Twenty-five minutes later, at exactly nine-thirty, Harry's pendant vibrated in the familiar way that indicated a signal from Snape. "Wow, what timing," he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "One minute earlier would not have been good."

He reached for the pendant to speak into it, but heard Snape's voice first. "Was it not explained to you, Professor, that when I signal, your end becomes an open channel immediately?"

Harry and Ginny exchanged an 'oops' grimace. "Sorry, Professor, I forgot."

"Evidently," said Snape in a very dry tone. "What is your availability?"

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Very well," Snape replied, breaking the connection.

Harry lay back down and put an arm around Ginny, who snuggled on his shoulder. "Think he's going to make some remark about that?" she asked.

Harry's expression indicated his indifference. "He might. But obviously I don't take it the way I would have before, since the situation is so different. Then, it would have been at my expense in a mean way. Now, it would be at my expense in a way intended to be humorous. It's a subtle difference."

"Well, as long as you can tell," she said, amused. "Why did you tell him fifteen minutes? You could have gone now."

"I just didn't want to jump up and go right then. It's not like he expects me to come the instant he calls, which is why he calls a bit earlier than he expects me there."

"I'm definitely glad to keep you here for another few minutes," she said. "So, what was the thing in Ron's letter, anyway? I never did find that out."

"I can't tell you. It's something extremely private about Pansy, something that I knew about her but Ron didn't. Skeeter was taunting him about that."

"It must've been pretty bad. I saw Ron's face, and he was really unhappy."

Harry nodded. "That's partly because she made it sound worse than it was, but he didn't know that when he first read it. But I explained it to him, they talked, and it's going to be okay. Were you bothered by what was in your letter?"

"My first reaction was that it was just... strange," she explained. "Like, why is someone telling me this? It was just very odd. I was mad at the obvious nastiness of the letter, but I didn't take it that seriously, and then even less after you explained it. It was a very nice thing for you to say, actually, to let her know that you could have felt that way about her. Of course, it's easy for me to be magnanimous, I'm the one that ended up with you." She shifted position, resting on her elbow, and looked him in the eye. "You know what makes me really happy?"

Doing his best to keep a straight face, he replied, "Yes, but unfortunately, I have to leave in fifteen minutes."

She chuckled. "Besides that. What makes me happy is that... probably Skeeter spent a fair amount of time around you that you didn't know, some of it recently. She had opportunity to hear you talk, a lot, when I wasn't around... and what she wrote in my letter was the worst thing she could think of, to try to hurt us. That means that you haven't said anything to anyone that would make me feel bad if I heard it, that you haven't kept any secrets from me. Most people don't get a chance to find that out in the way I just did. It's easy to keep secrets, it's easy to say things about people when you don't think they'll find out. You never did that. That makes me really happy." She leaned over and kissed him.

"I'm glad," he said, her happiness causing him to feel a warm glow of contentment. "I never thought about it, really. I

mean, I'm just so in love with you, I can't imagine what I would say, like that."

"I don't think it's a matter of how much you're in love," she said. "I mean, look at Hermione. She loves Neville a whole lot, but she said things that she's going to regret. And it's not as though Neville did something to make her say those things. There were just... circumstances in their relationship that were hard for her, like the situation with his grandmother, that we don't have."

"No, I'm pretty lucky with the in-law situation," said Harry.

"To tell you the truth," Ginny said reluctantly, "she obviously exaggerated and distorted it, but there was a lot that Skeeter said about Hermione that was more or less accurate. For example, Hermione is right a lot of the time, but she acts like she's right all the time, which makes her less able to deal with it when she's wrong. She made a huge mistake with Skeeter. She should have made her stop writing about us, but not stop writing altogether. She's been sitting around for two years with nothing to do but nurse a grudge, no wonder she hung around us. She was looking for ways to hurt Hermione, and she did it.

"I'm also sure that Skeeter was right about the house-elves, though the way she said it was cruel. I don't doubt they said those things. And I did hear that a few people were afraid to cross Hermione on the Astronomy O.W.L. thing. And where Hermione's 'I-know-best' thing hurts worst is with Neville. He's still kind of passive and... easily dominated, I guess, and Skeeter hit just the right note to hurt them both with the 'she's going to take over where your grandmother left off' thing. Neville's bound to think, do I want someone telling me what to do all my life? And if the answer is 'no,' he's going to start thinking just what Skeeter wants him to.

I'm sure Skeeter would consider it a major victory to break them up. You can't hurt anyone worse than that."

Harry thought for a minute. "I guess one question to ask is, did Skeeter deserve what Hermione did to her? I'm not sure I know the answer."

"I think the question Albus would ask is, what were Hermione's motives? Did she act out of a desire to protect herself and you from lies being told about you? Did she do it on behalf of future people who Skeeter didn't get a chance to lie about and hurt because Hermione stopped her from writing? She might say she did, or even think she did, but it's hard not to think that her main motive was revenge. And if it was... like Albus said, what we do to another, we do to ourselves. Hermione's getting back what she gave out, only worse."

"But Skeeter started it," Harry pointed out. "Of course, Albus would say that didn't matter, that because someone does something that hurts us doesn't justify hurting them back. As I learned, the hard way, a year ago."

She kissed him on the cheek and looked at him with sympathy. "Of course, that's easy to say, difficult to do. If someone did something to hurt you badly, I can't say that I wouldn't dedicate my life to making them suffer... because you mean so much to me."

"I hope you wouldn't," he said seriously. "But I see the point. It is a lot harder in the actual situation, and I'm not inclined to judge Hermione." He looked at the clock. "Looks like I need to get dressed and get going," he said, reaching for the bag he had brought from the Burrow with clean clothes.

"Oh, sure, and leave me to deal with the dirty clothes strewn all over the floor," joked Ginny. "Is this how it's going to be

when we're married?"

Smiling, Harry emptied the bag with the clean clothes and pointed his wand at the floor. All the dirty clothes flew off the floor and into the bag. "Never let it be said that I didn't do my part," he said as he got dressed.

"That's pretty good," she said, obviously impressed.
"Where'd you learn that?"

He shrugged. "I don't remember that I learned it particularly. I think it's just an offshoot of what the Aurors taught me about moving multiple objects. Same idea."

"Well, you may be useful around the house after all," she said, as she too got dressed. "I'll meet you back at the Burrow." He kissed her and left.

He walked into Snape's office exactly on time. "Good evening, Professor," said Snape politely. "No doubt you are feeling... rejuvenated."

Harry chuckled. "She wondered if you would say anything. Sorry about that, I just have to get used to it. But I suppose I needed to feel a bit rejuvenated. It was quite a long, hard day. I assume you heard about most of it."

Snape nodded. "I have decided that I will depart from my usual practice and focus on the events of your most recent day. It will be useful for me to know more clearly what is happening." Harry stared ahead, focusing on love, as Snape accessed Harry's memories of the past day. He saw Snape hit all the high points: the rescue of Neville and Hermione, and Hermione's account of it, receiving the letters, and Harry's conversation with Ron. He saw Snape smirk when Ron mentioned not letting Snape look through his memories, and

to his surprise, Snape positively snarled when he saw Harry and Ron joking about Ron's 'I love you.'

After Snape retreated from Harry's mind, Harry asked, "What was the problem?"

Snape glared at Harry. "Any branch of magic which requires two men to say they love each other has too high a price, no matter how otherwise useful."

Harry was not surprised that Snape felt this way, but rather at the strength of the feeling. "It's not necessarily a requirement, I think you know. It was just something Ron felt like he had to be able to do. But it seemed like what really upset you was our joking about it. People joke about that kind of stuff all the time."

"There is nothing funny about perversion," shot back Snape. Harry raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. Snape calmed himself, then said, "It is not my place to... editorialize about what I see here. I was simply answering your question. Do you think that Mr. Weasley will succeed in using your spells the next time he attempts it?"

Harry wondered if Snape was trying to deliberately move the subject away from his reactions. "My guess is that he will, and if he does, that the reason will be what he said to me. As you've heard me say before, I think that using the energy of love requires a total commitment to the idea, and Ron showed that commitment by doing something he was extremely uncomfortable doing." Suddenly curious about Snape's opinion, he asked, "Let me ask you... do you think I should try to teach this in my classes?"

Snape looked at Harry with disdain. "Surely you are joking. Having no hope of learning it myself, I am singularly unqualified to offer an opinion."

Harry frowned. "But you know what it is intellectually. You know what I had to do to get it to work, you've seen my memories. You can't give an objective opinion?"

"I cannot properly identify with what would be required of those students being taught, so I cannot speculate. You, Professor, are the person best qualified to make that judgment, and after that, those whom you have successfully taught. I suggest you ask their opinions."

Harry nodded. "I'd like to ask another question, if you don't mind... do you think Hermione was justified in what she did to Skeeter?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I gather from your use of the word 'justified' that you are seeking an opinion based on morality, which I am again unqualified to offer. My view is simply that an action is to be judged on its expected consequences. If the desired consequences outweigh the undesired consequences, and no more favorable actions are available, the action should be taken. If you ask whether I think Miss Granger's actions wise, the answer would be an unqualified 'no.' She acted from a position of strength that was expected to continue, but did not. If her objective was to cause Ms. Skeeter to cease publishing unfair articles, she could have conditioned her continued tolerance of Ms. Skeeter's articles on her evaluation of their fairness. Instead she prohibited Ms. Skeeter from writing altogether, an action with no purpose except its punitive nature. If her intention was to avenge herself upon Ms. Skeeter, she succeeded, but only for a limited time. So, as with all such decisions, evaluation of the decision must be based on what the individual hoped to accomplish."

Harry found it interesting that despite its lack of moral content, Snape's answer was nonetheless useful. It was in a

way similar to what Ginny had said a short time ago, which Snape had not seen: that Hermione's action only made sense in the context of wanting revenge. "Thank you, Professor. That was helpful."

Snape nodded. "Unless you have any further questions, we are finished for the time being."

"No, nothing, Professor, thanks."

Harry moved to leave, but Snape spoke again. "If I call you tomorrow, I shall do so at exactly ten p.m. This may assist you in scheduling your... activities."

Harry couldn't help but smile. Very dry humor, he thought, but sometimes funny. "Thank you, Professor. I appreciate that." He left Snape's office, Fawkes appeared, and Harry went to the Burrow.

Harry and Fawkes materialized in the living room, after which Fawkes perched on Harry's shoulder. Ron and Ginny were on the sofa talking, and Molly in a chair, knitting. Harry asked where Hermione was.

"Sleeping," said Ron. "When we came back, I sat in her room and talked to her some more. I didn't want her to be alone with her thoughts. Fawkes came and sang, and she finally fell asleep at about five or so. We've been trying to be quiet upstairs, we want her to get as much sleep as she can get."

"Also, because the longer she sleeps, the longer Neville has, to be ready before she sees him again," added Ginny. "She's still going to be desperate to see him, and he may not be ready. It's hard to say."

"That reminds me, I'd like to get there a little early, maybe ten minutes, if that's okay," said Harry.

"No problem, but you'd better eat soon, then," said Ginny.
"There's food for you in the kitchen."

Harry thanked Molly, and went into the kitchen. Arthur walked in, and said, "Harry, could I talk to you for a minute? Upstairs?"

Surprised, Harry nodded and headed upstairs. Arthur had never asked to talk to him privately like this before. Walking quietly so as to avoid waking Hermione, they went into Arthur and Molly's bedroom.

Arthur sat on a chair, and gestured Harry to sit on the bed. "There's something very important I need to ask you, Harry." Harry nodded, waiting for Arthur to continue. "You remember at that dinner a few weeks ago I was talking about Memory Charms, saying that I could recognize when one had been done. When I came home today, the first thing I noticed about Molly was that one had been done to her. A strong one, it was clear as day to me. Around the same time, Ron told me about the letters you all got. It's not hard to put two and two together. I would've asked Ron, except it was so strong I didn't think it could've been him, even if he'd been taught how to do it. So I'm asking, was it you?"

Solemnly, Harry nodded. "I assume Ron told you that the letters took information which was basically true, and twisted and distorted it so that it seemed much worse than it was?"

Arthur frowned. "Harry, I'm not questioning your motives. I know you, I'm sure you had the very best of intentions for what you did. But you need to understand that while we use Memory Charms a lot on Muggles because we have to, it takes the most extreme circumstances to justify using them on wizards and witches without their consent. The Aurors

must have explained this to you when they taught it to you. It's against the law for a very good reason. If people could just do it anytime they wanted, even with excellent intentions, people's memories would be at risk, no one would be safe." Arthur paused, staring at Harry earnestly. Then he glanced down and shook his head a little. "And there you sit, Harry Potter, maybe the most courageous wizard of your generation, a phoenix on your shoulder as a living testament to your character. If anyone's earned the right not to have his judgment questioned, it's you, but I still felt it was important to say what I said. So, having said all that, I'm very curious to know what could have prompted it."

Harry had wanted to interrupt, but felt that Arthur had the right to say what he wanted to say uninterrupted. Now he said, "Arthur, the fact that I'm Harry Potter had nothing to do with why I did it. I don't feel like I have any special rights, or have earned the privilege of breaking the law. I just... very strongly felt like it was the right thing to do. Molly's been through so much pain, she didn't deserve..." Harry pulled the letter he had taken from Molly out of his robes and handed it to Arthur, staying silent for a moment as Arthur read, his eyes widening.

"After you and Molly went upstairs that night, Fred and George did ask Ginny and I what we truly felt about Percy's death, how it affected us, but what Skeeter wrote is such an exaggeration as to not be true. The truth is, we all had ambivalent feelings about Percy, and we all felt badly about it. We didn't feel like we really knew him, we still had anger toward him for what he had done to this family, and we were very upset for what you and Molly had to go through. We just needed to talk about how we felt about it, and we couldn't do that with you and Molly around."

Arthur stared ahead, very emotional, but unexpressive. Then he looked down, and spoke. "It's not going to surprise you, I'm sure, to hear that I shared some of your ambivalence. I loved Percy, of course, he was my son. His betrayal hurt me worse than anything ever had, and I know I bear at least some responsibility for it. In the fight that drove him away, I was honest, but unnecessarily insulting. That doesn't excuse what he did, but... anyway, I can very well understand how you all felt. That was why what happened was so tragic."

Harry nodded. "I think we all kind of understood that. Anyway, Molly came out of the kitchen, holding the letter, tears were starting to come to her eyes... I just couldn't bear to think of it, that she should have to suffer this again. I just decided to do it."

Harry was sure Arthur was trying to hold back tears; Arthur said nothing. After a pause, Harry said, "If you tell me to, Arthur, I'll go and withdraw the charm, and hope that she forgives me for doing it."

Arthur shook his head. "No," he said quietly. "No, even though the principle of the law says I should take you up on it... but I love her, and like you, I would spare her the pain, especially as undeserved and spiteful as the letter is. I can't say I would have done it myself; she's my wife, and if spouses start doing it to one another... I do hope you'll never do it to Ginny, no matter the reason. But this is done, and I'm not going to undo it."

Arthur stood, and Harry did too. "Thank you, Harry, for being honest with me, though I didn't expect anything else." Harry felt like he wanted to say something else, but he didn't know what. He simply nodded and left.

When Harry got down to the kitchen, he looked at a clock and saw that it was eleven twenty-five, and he wanted to get to the Aurors' headquarters early. He ate as fast as he could, found Ginny, and they went through the fireplace.

Separating from Ginny, he headed toward the guest quarters. He knocked on the door, and after a few seconds, the door cracked open and Neville peeked through. Seeing Harry, he opened it, his face impassive. Harry walked in. He decided not to make small talk, feeling that Neville would be in no mood for it. "Neville, do you know who wrote those letters?"

He nodded. "Rita Skeeter. Cassandra told me, and she also told me that they're pretty exaggerated, but basically true."

"Not only exaggerated, but distorted," Harry pointed out. "In most of the letters we got, she makes something look really bad, but leaves out the information that explains why it's not really like that. That's the case for yours, too. Neville, if you take what she said seriously, you're doing exactly what this person who hates Hermione wants you to do. She'd like nothing better than to break you two up, to crush Hermione's spirit. She deliberately sent these letters right after you'd been through that horrible experience, so you'd be vulnerable. This is the kind of person we're talking about."

Neville looked pained. "I understand, Harry, and maybe you're right. But what she said in the letters... it really rang true. It's the kind of thing Hermione would do or say. She did try to pull me away from my grandmother, she did usually act like she knew what was best for me better than I did..."

Harry jumped in while Neville was pausing. "And those are important things that you need to talk about," he agreed.

"But you can't take anything seriously that this woman says, she's trying to destroy Hermione. Neville, since those letters came, Hermione's done nothing but cry, until she finally fell asleep. She's terrified that she'll lose you. You have to give her a chance."

"I will, Harry. I wasn't planning on never talking to her again, or something. I'm just... this is really difficult for me too, you know."

"I know. We all want to help you, both of you."

"It seems like you're mainly trying to help her. That's all you've talked about since you came in here."

"That's because she can help you best, Neville, if you let her. I know what happened to you is worse than what happened to me last year, but if I'd had Ginny when Sirius died, it would've helped a lot. I mean, I can tell you how sorry I am, and how much I support you, but it's not the same as if she does. She can help you better than we can, and she would be right now, if not for Skeeter. That's why I'm here telling you this. It's for her, but even more for you."

"I'm sorry, Neville. I have to go soon, my shift is starting. But I have a few minutes, and there's something I have to go and get."

Neville looked confused as Fawkes appeared. Harry and Fawkes left, and were back in fifteen seconds; Harry was holding Fawkes' tail in one hand and the Pensieve in the other. Harry shifted his memories into the Pensieve as an amazed Neville watched. "I'll be back for it later, after my shift." He headed for the door.

"Harry... is this..." Neville gaped.

Harry stopped at the door and nodded. "See you later."

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 4, Return to Privet Drive: Harry makes a mistake that could have had disastrous consequences, and finds that he may end up paying the price for Hermione's mistakes when Skeeter makes demands Harry finds difficult to accept.

From Chapter 4: "You can be my friend, or my enemy. If you choose to be my enemy, believe me, there's plenty I can do to make your lives miserable. Those letters were just a hint of it, to let you understand what you could be letting yourselves in for."

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Return to Privet Drive

Heading toward the Apparation detection room, Harry was intercepted by Ron in the standby area. Looking apprehensive, Ron said, "Harry, could you—"

"You want to be checked," Harry confirmed as Ron nodded. "Okay, I'll get Kingsley, just a minute."

A look at the clock showed two minutes to midnight. Harry found Kingsley. "Do you have a minute?"

"Right now, just a minute. What is it?"

"I'm not going to do this every night, but I was working with Ron today on this, and we think it's possible that he has it. We'd like to check him."

Kingsley sighed in annoyance. "All right, but tonight during your standby time, I'm teaching you the testing spell, you can check him from now on." They walked into the standby room.

Kingsley cast the spell on himself as they walked. They found Ron, and with no preliminary chat, Kingsley said to Ron simply, "Hit me." Ron fired, and a gold 100 appeared. Ron smiled and clenched a fist in triumph. Kingsley raised his eyebrows. "Well done. Okay, Ron, you know the drill. Noon tomorrow. I'm too busy right now, I'll check you for the actual spell then." He walked back to the detection room.

Smiling, Harry walked to Ron and put an arm around his shoulders. "Congratulations. I'm really happy for you." He leaned closer to Ron and whispered, "I'd give you a kiss, but you know, all these people..."

Ron laughed. "Right now, I'm so happy, I wouldn't care. Thank you, Harry, for everything."

"Happy to do it." Harry clasped Ron's shoulder, then walked to the detection room. He met Pansy, who was getting ready to leave. "How was the shift?"

"Kind of boring, really. No Apparations, just looked at maps." Noting his smile, she asked. "What are you so happy about?"

"Ron'll tell you."

She broke into a wide smile. "Oh, he did it! That's so great! Thank you for helping him, Harry." She hurried out to meet Ron.

Harry was on ready status for the first part of his shift; he tried to focus, to be ready to Disapparate at a moment's notice, but he kept drifting back to Ron's having achieved the use of the energy of love. Now that he had successfully taught all five of his friends, the question of whether, how, and under what circumstances to teach Hogwarts students loomed larger. He knew he had to decide soon, because consultations with parents, and perhaps scheduling considerations, had to be taken into account. He imagined what Snape's reaction would be if he were told that he had to re-do the schedule.

He eventually was able to focus better on the map displays. Thirty-five minutes later, for the first time in over a day, there was an Apparation. Harry quickly looked at the maps, and Disapparated. The first thing he saw was Dawlish,

already there, with his wand out. Harry thought he saw something flying away from a hooded figure, but he couldn't see it well.

Reflexively, Harry put down an anti-Disapparation field as Aurors fired on the figure, who went down under a barrage of Stunning spells. 'Yes!' exulted Harry mentally as Aurors rushed to the man, having already wrapped him in ropes. A few Aurors congratulated Dawlish, whose reaction was a grunt. "Let's get him back, and get out of here," said Dawlish.

Harry Apparated back in time to see that, as usual, the standby team had moved into the detection room as soon as the Apparation had happened, ready to rush off to assist. Harry exchanged a smile of triumph with Ginny as Kingsley announced, "We got one. Hubert was out there in zero point nine seconds, the first one to break one second." Harry saw the Aurors make impressed sounds and expressions; Harry knew himself how hard it was to even get close to one second.

Dawlish shrugged. "He was too slow Summoning the Portkey. Well, now's a good time for my nap." He walked off. Harry asked other Aurors about what had happened, and was told that they suspected that one factor assisting the capture was that the Death Eater had chosen too small an object as the Portkey. If it was so small that it couldn't be seen easily, and the Death Eater didn't remember exactly where it had been placed, the slight delay that could cause might be enough to allow the capture. Harry assumed that when Dawlish had arrived the Portkey had already been Summoned by the Death Eater; to interrupt it, the Auror had to redirect it away before it could be caught by the Death Eater, and he had to be stronger than the Death Eater.

The rest of Harry's first three hours was uneventful, and at three o'clock he walked to the standby area, briefly clasping hands with Ginny as they passed. He looked for Kingsley, who spent fifteen minutes teaching him the spell which detected how much of one's potential one was using when doing spells silently. Kingsley then did a test, which showed the usual 100.

"Thanks, Kingsley," said Harry. "I would have had to learn this anyway, since I'm teaching the N.E.W.T. classes this year. Not to mention for any classes where I might try to teach the energy of love. Which I still don't know if I'm going to do or not."

"That reminds me, Harry... has McGonagall, or Dumbledore, talked to you about your future recently?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, they want me to stay, maybe be headmaster someday. They both told me."

Kingsley looked at him carefully. "It seems the idea doesn't thrill you."

"It's an honor, of course, but... this is what I want to do. I mean, I do understand their point. I'll probably be able to teach the energy of love better than anyone else. But that doesn't change the fact that I'd rather do this."

"I know, Harry. And we're happy that this is what you want. The truth is, when Dumbledore first talked to me about this, I started getting a bit hot under the collar. We thought we had you for sure; I felt like the rug was being yanked out from under me. But he made sense, in that damnable way he had... or at least, it was damnable if you didn't like what he was saying. Not only is it true that you'll be able to teach it best, but he was also right when he said that your stature would matter there more than here. Kids will go to Hogwarts

to be taught by Harry Potter, who repeatedly defied Voldemort, and discovered this extremely useful new type of magic. Winston's told me that his daughter's told him how you're regarded by the students. I can see why that would be very valuable for Hogwarts, and for the students.

"If you end up with us, we'll be very pleased. But I want to make sure you know that if you don't, we'll understand why, and we won't hold it against you." He paused, then added, deadpan, "We'll hold it against Dumbledore." Kingsley then smiled, and so did Harry. "I'm glad he's not totally gone, I feel like I can make jokes like that. Anyway... you could still sort of be with us part-time, like in the summers, and for special situations like this. That would be when we could use you most, anyway. We had that kind of relationship with Dumbledore. I know you don't have to make a decision anytime soon, but I wanted to let you know where we stood on this. You must think about it sometimes; I know it's a big decision."

"These days, I try not to, and with stuff like this going on, it's pretty easy not to," replied Harry. "But I understand, and I appreciate what you said. I'm glad to know that I can at least be with you in some way, whatever I choose.

"By the way, I was wondering... when Dawlish caught that one, it was well into my shift, but he's usually on the other shift. Is he changing shifts?"

Kingsley shrugged. "Not really. He's just... drifting a bit. I gave you and Neville lectures about pacing yourselves, and we do make sure that most Aurors do twelve hours and no more. But Dawlish and I are the senior Aurors, and as such we can disregard the guidelines we give to others. We've both been doing more than twelve hours here and there. He told me he felt more 'in the zone' today, and it sure looks

like he was right. He'll probably sleep for six hours and come right back if he still feels in the zone. It's almost like being an athlete, in a way. Most of us here are performing at a very high level—including you, your one point four, one point five is very impressive for an Auror, never mind an inexperienced one—and it's really hard to do better once you've done the best you can. Where you are mentally is the key, which is why it's so stressful to be at the ready for so long. A tenth of a second can be the difference between catching someone and not catching them, as you just saw. Dawlish is the best we have, so if he wants to do more and thinks he can pace himself, I'm not going to quibble with him."

"Just curious," Harry assured Kingsley, not wanting him to think that he was making judgments about how the Aurors did things. "Well, I'm going to get started on my drills." He got up.

"Oh, and Harry... happy birthday," said Kingsley, with the barest smile.

"Wow, I forgot all about that," said Harry. "Thanks. Funny, my birthday's never been such a happy occasion for me, since I was always stuck with my Muggle relatives at the time. Probably everyone would be making a big fuss about it if this wasn't going on. I'm just happy to be doing something useful." Harry walked off and started his response-time drills.

There were no Apparations during Ginny's three hours on ready status, and Harry went back into the main room at six o'clock. He remembered what Kingsley had said about the mental aspect of this being the most important, and he started to wonder if there was some way he could improve his performance in that area. He kept focused on the wall as he thought; he thought of himself as a sprinter waiting for the gun to sound so he could leap out of the starting blocks.

At five minutes after seven the red lights on the wall lit up, and maps were instantly displayed. Harry had known before that specific addresses could be displayed as well, but often were not, since the Death Eaters mostly chose relatively abandoned areas that didn't have street addresses; usually the only text on the wall was the name of the city, and perhaps the neighborhood. But now, something extremely familiar was displayed: the text read, Surrey, Little Whinging, 4 Privet Drive, Living Room. Seeing this, Harry reacted instantaneously; he suddenly found himself in the Dursleys' living room.

Harry was in the center of the living room. He could see the three Dursleys at the kitchen table, and there was a hooded figure between Harry and them. The first thing he heard after he Apparated was the word "Kedavra!" spoken by the hooded figure, and he saw the green bolt flying at Dudley. Again acting by pure reflex, Harry performed three spells in quick succession, in less than a second. First, without his conscious thought, he put up a Killing Curse shield around Dudley. Harry then deployed an anti-Disapparation field as the hooded figure whirled in surprise to look at the source of the shield. To Harry's shock, the hooded figure was Draco Malfoy. As Aurors started Apparating in, Harry shot off a Stunning spell at Malfoy, who was now trying to Disapparate. The spell hit Malfoy, who was lifted off his feet and thrown back two yards, his back slamming into the solid oak kitchen table. He fell to the ground in obvious pain.

Petunia and Vernon were speechless, in shock at what had happened, and the suddenness of it. Dudley's expression turned from shock to outrage as he got to his feet and stood over Malfoy. He looked at Harry. "That was a Killing Curse, wasn't it?" he asked Harry, almost accusingly, though Harry knew Dudley's anger was directed at Malfoy. Harry nodded. Furious, Dudley looked at the prone Malfoy and suddenly

kicked his head. Stunned, Harry didn't move as two Aurors leaped forward; Dudley got in one more very solid-sounding kick before being restrained by Aurors as Malfoy howled in pain. Harry suddenly felt pleased at what Dudley had done; he knew the feeling was unworthy, but couldn't help feeling it.

Two more Aurors pulled Malfoy to his feet, Malfoy bleeding from one cut on his cheek and from his mouth. Harry walked forward, stopping right in front of Malfoy. Seeing Malfoy's expression of rage and pain, Harry had a sudden idea. Already holding his wand, Harry silently cast Legilimens. He found his way into Malfoy's mind very quickly, and looked not for feelings, but for memories having to do with his mission. He saw an image of Voldemort talking to Malfoy, then Malfoy talking to his father, followed by an image of Malfoy in a deserted area setting up a Portkey and activating it.

Malfoy's eyes widened in alarm as he realized what Harry was doing. He started to say something, but Harry cut him off, speaking first. Turning to the Aurors, his tone conveying his surprise, Harry said, "This wasn't authorized! This isn't what he was supposed to do!" Malfoy's expression was one of anger and increasing panic.

Kingsley walked up to Harry. "What's he doing here, then? I mean, it's not like Death Eaters run around disobeying orders."

"No, they don't," agreed Harry, who found himself smiling at Malfoy. "He thought he could get away with it, though. He was supposed to go straight to the Portkey, like usual. What he decided to do was come here, kill Dudley, and go from here to the Portkey." Now staring in satisfaction at Malfoy, he continued, "It never occurred to him that because I used to

live here, I'd be able to get here way faster than he thought anyone would. He was going to not even tell the Death Eaters what he'd done! He was going to just pretend it was a routine, successful mission. Voldemort would've known anyway, of course, but Malfoy here's so full of himself he didn't understand that."

Harry moved closer to Malfoy, his face a foot away from Malfoy's. Malfoy's expression vacillated between anger and fear; Harry's was hard, pitiless. "Too bad we can't just send him back," said Harry, never breaking eye contact with Malfoy. "Voldemort doesn't like failure, Malfoy, and he likes his orders disobeyed even less. If you ever manage to get back to him, what he'll do to you will make what Neville went through look like a stubbed toe by comparison." Malfoy flinched in fear just a little, despite obviously trying hard not to react to what Harry said.

"All right," said Kingsley, looking slightly bewildered, "everybody head on back, get him out of here. Harry and I will be along, we just need to talk to Harry's relatives."

As the Aurors started to move Malfoy away, Harry remembered something else. "Oh, Kingsley," he said, wanting to say it while Malfoy was still around, "one thing Malfoy was also kind enough to recall was that the magic number is three." Again with satisfaction, Harry saw Malfoy wearing a definitely panicked expression. "If three of them in a row get caught, Voldemort will give up, and we win. At least, that's what Malfoy's been told."

Kingsley frowned in puzzlement. "That doesn't sound like the kind of thing they'd tell someone like him."

"'They' didn't," Harry explained. "Voldemort told his father, and his father told him. Good to know they have security

problems."

"Yes, I'd say so," agreed Kingsley as Aurors started Disapparating, one escorting Malfoy. Harry and Kingsley turned to the Dursleys. Petunia and Vernon were still in mild shock, but Dudley's expression was close to normal. Harry glanced at the table, which he noticed was different from the one they'd had when he was last there.

"Nice table," remarked Harry. "When'd you get it?"

"Christmas," replied Dudley. "Yeah, it is. Very solid."

"Yes, that came in handy," said Harry. "You know, the Weasleys have one like this, except it cleans and puts away—"

"Harry," chided Kingsley, "you'll have to catch up some other time. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, I'm sorry that we couldn't have prevented this from happening. Fortunately, no harm was done—"

"No harm?" repeated a suddenly outraged Vernon. "Our breakfast is interrupted by a wand-wielding maniac who almost kills our son, who you are supposed to be protecting, and you say no harm was done?"

"He meant that no one was hurt or killed," said Harry helpfully. Vernon gave Harry the same dirty look Harry had seen many times before, especially on the occasions when he had mouthed off to Vernon.

"And they did protect me," pointed out Dudley. "I am still alive."

"Just barely!" shrieked Petunia, still shaken. "He was just suddenly... there, and doing that curse! Dudley was a half of

a second away from death! Can't you do anything about that?"

Harry had a sudden thought. "Couldn't I put an anti-Disapparation plot around the house, like the one at the Weasleys'?"

"Yes, that would be the only real solution," agreed Kingsley. "If you like, we'll do that." To their blank expressions, Kingsley explained, "It's a spell that can be done to a specific area of land. When it's finished, no one can enter or leave the area the way Malfoy just did, the way we did."

"That sounds all right," said Petunia. "Then, do that now, please."

"I'm sorry, we can't do it right now," said Kingsley. "First of all, it takes a few hours, and secondly, Harry is extremely busy right now, working with us in a crisis situation. Thirdly, he'll have to be protected while he does it, which is a use of manpower we can't afford. He can do it after the crisis is over."

"Why does he have to do it?" asked Vernon. "Couldn't any of you do it? Someone who wasn't so busy and wouldn't have to be protected?"

"Any of us could do it," agreed Kingsley, "but the stronger the wizard, the more effective the plot will be. In terms of raw power, Harry is the strongest wizard we have."

Petunia and Vernon's eyebrows went high. "He's only seventeen! How did that happen?" asked Petunia.

"Oh, I know! It's that energy-of-love thing, right?" asked Dudley, who snickered immediately after he said it.

Harry looked at Dudley, amused. "Real mature, Dudley."

"Well, you have to admit, it sounds kind of stupid," replied Dudley.

"I can see why you would say that," admitted Harry, "but it may seem less stupid if you consider that without it, you'd be dead right now." Dudley made a 'hadn't thought of that' expression. "Anyway, I'd be happy to do it as soon as I can, but Kingsley's right, it can't be until the crisis is over." Harry gave a brief summary of what was happening, finishing with, "If we get lucky the next time this happens, it could be over in a few days. But we just can't say."

"That is unacceptable!" shouted Petunia. "This could happen again any time!"

"It's not going to happen, Aunt Petunia," said Harry before Kingsley could comment. To her doubtful expression, he continued, "All right, I can't say it's absolutely impossible, but really, it's not going to happen. Malfoy's the only one of them who gave a damn about Dudley, and we have him now. The other ones don't even know he did this, so they're not going to come here to finish it. Also, Voldemort didn't authorize it, and most Death Eaters aren't so stupid as to disobey his orders. It's just not going to happen."

"You didn't think this would happen, either, obviously," argued Petunia.

"Mrs. Dursley," said Kingsley patiently, "as you heard Harry explain, the nature of the crisis is such that we are monitoring all Apparation very closely. In the extremely unlikely event that someone did this again, we would respond very quickly."

"Quickly enough to save Dudley?" asked Petunia suspiciously. Gesturing to Harry, she said, "He was faster than the rest of you. He was here first, he was the only one who got here in time. And I thought he was the only one who could do those spells. What if it happened while he was asleep?" Harry now realized that Petunia had definitely read the articles she had been sent for the past year.

"My friends can do them too," Harry said. "They're helping with the crisis as well. As for my getting here fast, as you heard me say to Malfoy, it's because I lived here. I don't need to figure out where it is. The others who know the spell couldn't have gotten here this fast. Now, what we could do is, and it wouldn't take long... I could bring them over here, show them through the house, the yard, the backyard... if they've been here, in every room, then they could get here as fast as I could."

"I'm not going to have a bunch of these... people tromping through my home!" shouted Petunia indignantly.

"Well, that's the only way to make sure Dudley's completely safe from this kind of... oh, wait, there is another way. He could stay at the Burrow until the crisis is over. There's an extra bed, I'm sure Molly wouldn't mind."

Dudley's eyes lit up, but Petunia stared daggers at Harry. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"No, he's right," said Kingsley thoughtfully. "He'd be totally safe there, and Molly's very nice, and a good parent, it would be all right with them, I'm sure."

Petunia continued to stare at Harry. "This isn't funny."

"What's the problem?" asked Kingsley.

"To say they don't like magic and wizards is a major understatement," explained Harry to Kingsley. "She doesn't want Dudley in a magical environment."

Petunia and Vernon looked somewhat abashed at this having been said right in front of them. Good, Harry thought. "Oh," said Kingsley. "Then why did you suggest him staying there, if you knew that?"

"To point out to Aunt Petunia that there are worse things than having a few wizards 'tromping' through her home," he said, staring at Petunia.

She gave him a particularly nasty look before sighing in surrender. "When do they need to come, and how soon can it be done?"

Harry looked at Kingsley. "Today, shift change? I can get Ron and Pansy to come in fifteen minutes early, give them the tour, let them do a few test Apparations, make sure their times are okay, then do the same with Ginny after they're done."

"Yes, that sounds fine," agreed Kingsley. To the Dursleys, he said, "We'll need to be here from eleven forty-five to twelve-thirty."

"I'll be out doing errands," sniffed Petunia. "Dudley, you can come with me."

"Nah, I'll stay here. Make sure they don't break anything." Harry and Dudley exchanged a glance, both knowing that Dudley was joking.

"They'd better not," grumbled Petunia.

"We'll be very careful not to disturb anything, Mrs. Dursley," Kingsley assured her. "We'll leave now, and you can get on with your breakfast. Ready, Harry?"

Harry nodded and prepared to Disapparate. Dudley said, "Oh, Harry... happy birthday."

Harry grinned. "Thanks," he said, then waved goodbye and Disapparated.

Delighted, Ginny walked up to Harry and grabbed his shoulders. "You got Malfoy! That's so great!"

"Yeah, it is," agreed Harry. "I can't wait to tell Pansy."

Kingsley took a few steps over, standing next to Harry. "It is great, Ginny, but while you're on ready status—"

"Looking at the wall, being ready," acknowledged Ginny, turning to look at the maps. "Sorry."

"It's understandable," said Kingsley. "Would you stay out here a few more minutes? I need to talk to Harry."

Ginny agreed, and Harry and Kingsley walked out to the standby room and sat down; Kingsley chose a spot where they couldn't easily be overheard. "First of all, congratulations. That was a tremendous performance. I checked, and you got out there in zero point five seconds."

"Yeah, but that was only because I knew the place."

"No, that's a very good time even if you know where you're going, and especially considering you didn't expect to be going anyplace you knew. You have really good reflexes. Also, the speed with which you acted once you got out there

was excellent. I got there fast enough to see that you were one step ahead of Malfoy all the way."

Harry shrugged. "He's not that great a wizard."

"By which I assume you mean, he's not as good as you," Kingsley noted wryly. "Now, there is something else... not a big problem, but something I want to make sure you're aware of--"

Harry nodded, figuring Kingsley would bring it up. "I enjoyed myself a bit too much."

"Yes, but I see you're aware of it, that's good. I don't blame you, Harry. I know your history with him. Most of us don't have a bete noire." Seeing Harry's puzzled expression, Kingsley explained, "It means, like a personal enemy."

Harry chuckled mildly. "This is part of being Harry Potter. Most people don't have one; I have two."

"That's true. One for your childhood, one as an adult... and since you're right on the bridge between the two, you deal with both of them these days. Anyway, it's entirely possible that full-fledged Aurors in your situation would have acted the same way. It would be hard not to make it personal when someone's tried several times to kill you, tortured your partner and a good friend, and so on. Hell, I might have done the same thing. I just wanted to be sure you knew that it wasn't exactly by-the-book Auror behavior in that kind of situation. But it seems like you understand that."

"Yes, I do. Even at the time, I understood that I really shouldn't have been like that. But it was such a good opportunity, I couldn't resist, especially since it was me personally that got him. That reminds me, I wondered after I

did it, did I break any laws by pulling the information out of him like that?"

"Technically, yes," answered Kingsley, "but Aurors are allowed a great deal of leeway in that kind of situation, and you're functioning as an Auror right now, so there'd be no consequences. I was going to bring that up, but for another reason. Most Legilimens don't let it be known that they are. Are you planning to let everybody know, or did you do that only because there were just Aurors, and you know they won't let it get around?"

"I hadn't thought about it, really. I think the main reason I said it the way I did was because of Malfoy. I—"

"You were gloating," observed Kingsley, not unkindly.

"I guess so," Harry admitted. "He knew I had pulled it out anyway, of course, the other person sees the memory as you do. I just wanted him to see... yes, I suppose 'gloating' is a pretty good word for it. I could have told you all that stuff back at headquarters later, I didn't have to tell you then." Harry was starting to feel a bit embarrassed.

"Yes, which is another point. Again, Harry, this is not to give you a hard time, but to make sure you know certain things. Aurors can be trusted, but in that kind of situation it's proper procedure to give information like that to the senior Auror privately as soon as possible, unless it's time-sensitive. It's then for the senior Auror to decide what's to be shared and what's not."

"I understand," said Harry quietly, hoping that Kingsley would find no more breaches of proper Auror behavior to point out to him.

Apparently, Kingsley did not. "What's the problem with your aunt and uncle, anyway? They were strange, even given what had happened to them. Are they like that just because they don't like magic?"

"Yes. That was good behavior, for them. They were only that polite because they were talking to the people who were hopefully going to keep Dudley safe; they're afraid that if they totally alienate the Aurors, we won't protect Dudley. Normally, they would have had a long, screaming fit over what happened, blaming you, me, the magical world, and so on."

Kingsley shook his head. "That was the other strange thing... you saved their son's life, you'd think they could manage to say 'thank you.'"

"Nope. The way they see it, I, or my presence, is the only reason Dudley's in any danger in the first place. So even if I save his life, it's a wash, because I was responsible for his danger."

Kingsley was incredulous. "You must be kidding."

"'Fraid not."

"Quite a life you've had. Oh, one other thing. When you were talking about showing the Dursleys' house to the others, you didn't mention Hermione. Do you know something that I don't?"

"No, not exactly, but I just assumed she wouldn't be back yet. Now that we have Ron and Pansy for the noon-to-midnight shift, and she suffered a lot in the past two days, I thought she might need a few days off."

"Yes, I was thinking that too," said Kingsley. "I just wanted to make sure that there wasn't anything I didn't know. Okay, well, let's get back to it."

As Neville had been, Harry was treated to cake and birthday wishes during his last standby shift. He also got many congratulations for his capture of Malfoy, and his protestations that it wasn't that much since he knew the house were met with good-natured scoffing. He was pleased at the compliments, but what meant more was the thought that if they caught the next one, it would be over.

He thought about what he could do to improve his time; it was difficult to think of anything. He knew he had excellent reflexes, and his relatively good times were mostly due to that, but he just hadn't been looking at maps long enough to know them well enough to improve his times. Dawlish, by comparison, had excellent reflexes and near-total recall, Harry had been told, and so barely needed to look at the first two maps at all.

Harry wondered if there was some way he could 'cheat,' as he put it in his mind. He remembered the first time he had Apparated by looking at maps; he had not known exactly where Cassandra was, but he had ended up mere inches from her, having intended simply to end up as close to her as possible. Had that been chance, or could it be duplicated? If so, how?

He considered the idea of giving quicker looks to the first two maps, and maybe just an extremely short glance at the third, hoping that intuition, or whatever had guided him so close to Cassandra, would put him where he wanted to go. He knew it was a risk, though: if he was wrong, he could end up far outside the target area, maybe too far to see or help others under attack. He reminded himself that his was

technically a support role; he was expected to protect the ones who went out, not necessarily do any capturing himself. But on the other hand, the next attempt would be very important; if it was successful, the Apparation crisis would probably be over. Harry debated what to do. He wouldn't have to decide until the next day, he realized, as Ginny was on ready status for the last three hours of their shift.

At ten minutes after eleven she called him on her hand; she needed to go to the bathroom, and the one on standby always filled in for that time, even though it was only a few minutes. He took her place as she headed off. Three minutes later, out of the corner of his eye he saw her heading back. As he thought about returning to the standby area, the alarms went off and the walls lit up. Harry made an instant decision to use the riskier method, knowing that if he missed the mark substantially it would not be disastrous, since Ginny would follow in a few seconds. He took glances at the first two maps, barely looked at the third one at all, and Disapparated, trusting his instincts, or fate, to take him where he wanted to go.

He appeared in a field containing mostly weeds, but the first thing he noticed was something hitting his head. Knocked off balance, he tried to right himself as he noticed a soccer ball rising in the air above him; he realized that was what had hit him. He heard multiple Apparation sounds, and then from behind him, what sounded like someone hitting the ground. Recovering his balance, he turned to see the hooded Death Eater sprawled unconscious, as the soccer ball fell to the ground a few feet away.

Dawlish and a few other Aurors approached Harry as he looked around, slightly befuddled. "Looks like you got him, but I didn't see how it happened," admitted Harry.

"I think you mean, 'we' got him," replied Dawlish, amused at Harry's confusion. "Let's go back, and we'll see if I can explain it to you." He Disapparated, and as he saw two Aurors pick up the fallen Death Eater, Harry followed.

Harry appeared in the detection room as the Aurors were returning. He saw Dawlish nod at Kingsley, who smiled and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, we have our third consecutive capture!" Harry heard cheers and sounds of triumph, and he smiled as Ginny put an arm around his waist.

"And the times," Kingsley continued, "when I saw these times, I had a feeling we had a capture. Hubert Dawlish reached the scene in zero point nine seconds... and Harry Potter reached the scene in zero point eight seconds." There was a gasp, and Ginny gaped at him; Harry suddenly felt very self-conscious.

Dawlish now addressed the room. "That's not even the strange thing," he said. "The strange thing is where he ended up. The Death Eater had Summoned the Portkey, which was a soccer ball; when I got there, it had just hit Harry in the head. Somehow, he Apparated right in the path of the ball. I would've been there just in time to miss a capture, but as it was, we were able to Stun him. If Harry hadn't landed on that exact spot, the Death Eater would have made it. So, Harry, I think I'm not the only one curious to know how you did that."

"I'm kind of curious myself," he said. "I did do something different; I decided to look at maps less and trust... intuition, instinct, fate, I don't know... more. I knew it was a little risky, but I thought, this may be the chance to end it, so I did it. I really don't know how to explain it better than that."

There was silence for a second, then an Auror said, "The energy of love strikes again." Most everyone laughed, but Harry couldn't help but wonder if there was any truth in it.

Aurors resumed chatting, and a celebratory atmosphere prevailed, although the Aurors were still serious about their tasks, ready to Disapparate. Harry turned to Ginny, whose pendant was blinking pink. She spoke into it, then looked at Harry. "Pansy was just letting me know, she and Ron will be here in ten minutes or so. They're coming a little early."

Kingsley stepped over and tapped Harry on the shoulder. "It's less than an hour, but you should go ahead and take the rest of the shift off. You can visit with Neville and Hermione, they're in Neville's quarters. If there's another Apparation, you'll hear the alarms." Harry thanked Kingsley, said goodbye to Ginny, and left.

Harry knocked on the door to Neville's temporary quarters, and the door was opened by Hermione. "Harry!" she squealed happily as she wrapped him in a hug.

Harry was mystified for a moment, then understood. "I guess you heard about Malfoy."

"News travels fast around here," said Neville, as Hermione kissed Harry's cheek, then let him go. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," said Harry. "So, how are you two doing?"

Neville and Hermione glanced at each other, their expressions suggesting that it wouldn't be easy to put the answer into words. "It's been a long night, and I guess you could say, emotionally exhausting," said Neville. "But this helped a lot," he added, gesturing to the Pensieve. "I know it's not only you, it was Gran and Albus too, but I want to

thank you for helping to get it to me. It made today a whole lot less difficult." Neville looked at Harry with great affection.

"I was happy to do it, Neville. I'm glad it helped. It's funny, I felt a little like I shouldn't have watched it, because it was really private, even though I know that you can't watch it if I don't. I felt like crying when I saw it, and it wasn't even for me."

Neville nodded. "After I saw it for the first time, I cried for, like, a half hour." Harry understood that it was an indication of Neville's trust and confidence in him that he would tell Harry something like that. "I think some of it was sadness, some was happiness that she didn't really die, if you know what I mean, and some of it was just all the emotion in this situation. Then I called Hermione and asked her to come over. I knew I had to show her what was in there."

"Then when I saw it," said Hermione, "I cried for a long time, too. I was happy for Neville, still sad that he'd lost his grandmother, guilty for things I said, the way I acted... we talked about it, and cried together... lots of crying in this room tonight. What his grandmother said about our relationship, it made so much sense, but we hadn't thought about it like that. In a way, we hadn't thought about it at all. You know, just living day to day, you don't think to talk about the way your relationship is going unless you have a problem. I mean, I'll bet you and Ginny haven't sat down and had a conversation about what your relationship is like."

"No, we haven't," said Harry.

Hermione nodded. "I wouldn't think most people would. Anyway, we've spent a lot of the past nine hours talking about this. I was really grateful that his grandmother said the things she did about him and me, because I was so

scared about what might happen. You know I was extremely angry at what Skeeter said in those letters, I still am, but I couldn't deny that there was some truth to them. I knew in some ways I hadn't treated Neville very well, and you know I was terrified I might lose him." Hermione's voice started to reflect some of the emotion of what she had gone through. "I told him today that I would beg, I would plead, I would grovel if that was what it took for him to stay with me." Harry's eyebrows rose involuntarily as she spoke. She continued, "He didn't make me, of course, but I would have. You're wondering why I would say that to you, Harry, even if I would say it to Neville. It's for the same reason Ron told you he loved you. I want myself, and Neville, to know that I'm willing to say that to another person, that I accept the... giving up my pride, loss of control, whatever you want to call it. That I don't have to be in control all the time, have all the power. I always have, although I didn't realize it. Neville always worried that he wasn't good enough for me, but I never worried. Then after the letters, I started to worry that I wasn't good enough for him, and like I said, it terrified me. Or, as Muggles say, it put the fear of God into me. I don't want to be like I have been. Like, with the Legilimency thing. I compromised my privacy to help you, and I don't regret that, but I compromised Neville's, too, without asking him, and I shouldn't have done that. It wasn't that I didn't respect him enough to—I just thought it would be easier for him not to know—but I understand now that that's how it could seem, and I should have asked him."

"In a way," said Neville, "the Legilimency thing was the worst thing in the letter. I mean, once I got over the shock of losing Gran, and the rest of what happened, I knew full well that Hermione would never want anything to happen to Gran. And the training thing, well, that wasn't great, and she did apologize—"

"One of the longer and more humble apologies," said Hermione, with an expression that showed her unhappiness at what she had done. "I think I've apologized more today than I have for everything else in my life, combined."

"Well, anyway," continued Neville, mildly embarrassed, "I do know that many women say that, it just kind of hurt more in my case, for obvious reasons. But the Legilimency thing was..." Neville trailed off.

"Neville is coming up to a part of the sentence where it would be critical of me, and he feels bad, since I've already apologized so much," said Hermione wryly. "It was typical of how I've dealt with him, my always thinking I know what's best, and assuming I should make decisions for him without his consent. I can see why that hurt him a lot, it is kind of a betrayal of trust. I mean, my intentions were good, but..."

"You know, Harry, I don't blame you for any of that," Neville assured him. "It seemed like you were looking kind of guilty there. It's not your job to ask her if it's okay with me to do that. But I know what her reasons were, and yes, I'll be kind of embarrassed if you see certain things. And I understand there are aspects of the situation that I'm not supposed to know about. But she could have just told me that, instead of telling me nothing at all."

Hermione nodded. "I should have. And I feel bad about it, Harry, but after talking about it with Neville, I have to modify part of what I promised you. From now on when we do Legilimency, there will be one memory that I'll have to put in the Pensieve every time. I am sorry about that, to you and to Ginny, but it really is necessary."

Harry shook his head, dismissing her apology. "My first reaction is, only one? I'm sure Ginny and I both understand

that Neville's needs are part of this, too. Besides, the time when your gesture was most needed and appreciated has passed."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Hermione, who Harry knew could not elaborate for fear of giving Neville information he wasn't supposed to know. "I still feel bad, though, for promising something I couldn't deliver on."

"Really, don't worry about it," he assured her. "Ginny and I won't, I promise." Remembering something she'd said in passing, he asked, "Ron told you about that?"

"Yes, he stayed with me yesterday afternoon until I fell asleep," explained Hermione. "He was really nice. He told me all about what you two did. I was impressed that he did it, and even more impressed that he told me all about it. He said it was to 'embrace his embarrassment,' as you put it, but I know it was also to keep my mind off things. It worked pretty well; what you guys did was really interesting. He says he wants it to stay within the six of us, but except for that, he doesn't care. And I heard it worked, he got his 100, so I was really happy for him."

As she finished the sentence, there was a knock at the door. Hermione walked over to get it, and Pansy and Ron walked in. Harry noticed that Pansy's pendant was blinking red. "Hi," said Ron. "Just so you know, Pansy has an open channel on her pendant to Ginny. She's still on ready status, but we want her to be able to hear us, since she's the only one not here. If she wants to say something, she'll say it to Harry, and he can tell us." Harry understood the reason; Ginny could look at him in her hand while on ready status—his hand had started tingling when Ron and Pansy came in—and she could talk to him without making noise.

Pansy walked to Harry and put her hands on his shoulders. "I heard about Malfoy, of course. I can't tell you how happy I am, and how grateful. I'm not sure you can know what it means to me to have him out of the way." She stepped forward, kissed him on the cheek, and gave him a long hug. Embarrassed, he smiled as she finally let go.

He listened as he heard Ginny speak in his head, then chuckled. "Ginny says that you can thank me even more than that if you want," he said, as the others laughed. "I think she likes seeing me embarrassed."

"I think we already knew that," said Ron. "I'd like to congratulate you too, Harry, though I'll skip the hug and kiss, and just offer a manly handshake."

Harry smiled and shook Ron's hand as Pansy said, "Should we consider it significant that he feels the need to specifically mention how manly it is?"

Harry and Ron said 'no' as one. "You two would say that," laughed Pansy.

"Actually, Harry, since the Pensieve is conveniently here, we were wondering if we could see what happened," suggested Ron.

"Okay," agreed Harry. "I'm actually wondering what you guys will think." He put back the memory of Neville's grandmother, and put in the memory of Malfoy's capture, stopping it when the Aurors took Malfoy away. He watched it with them. Ginny couldn't see, of course, but he knew he could show it to her anytime later.

Exiting the Pensieve, his friends looked at him with varying degrees of surprise. Neville was the first to speak. "Harry, do

you think you were like that partly because of what happened to me and Hermione?"

"The thought crossed my mind," agreed Harry. "It was probably that, what he did to Pansy and Ginny, and just his being Malfoy for the past six years."

"Well, obviously, I loved it," said a grinning Ron. "I could watch it a dozen times, it was so cool. The funny thing is... it occurred to me that it's not really in keeping with what we talked about yesterday. But I'd have been disappointed if you hadn't done it the way you did. After everything Malfoy's done to us, I think we deserve to watch him squirm."

Harry couldn't argue with Ron about that. "It never occurred to me in the situation, but I don't think I could have helped myself anyway, it was so good. Finally, after all this time, I have Malfoy in my power, I was the one who caught him, I could just invade his memories and take some at will, use the information to scare the hell out of him... I knew, on some level, that I shouldn't be like that, that it should just be that I was an Auror and he was a criminal. But, in the situation, I just couldn't. Not with him."

"Harry, I think you're holding yourself to the Dumbledore standard of behavior here," said Hermione. "Nobody in the world would blame you for doing what you did, knowing your past with him. Some people might say you restrained yourself well. You didn't kick him in the head, for example."

They all smiled. "Yeah, but you noticed I wasn't leaping up to stop it, either."

"Well, again, that's the Dumbledore standard," said Ron. "Yes, I was thinking, I'm beginning to rather like Dudley."

"Look, Harry, I enjoyed it, and I refuse to feel bad for enjoying it," put in Neville. "I especially liked how you mentioned what happened to me to threaten him, and how well it worked. In fact, I was thinking I'd give you a kiss too, like Pansy, but then I realized it wouldn't be very manly." The others all laughed, including Harry.

"Couldn't you just give him a manly kiss, Neville?" joked Pansy. "Of course, I'm with them, I could watch it a dozen times as well. You'll have to leave it in there sometime, Ron and I can make an evening of it."

"It's not like I'm totally proud of it, though," said Harry uncomfortably. "I mean, when you get right down to it, it was Schadenfreude. I was enjoying his pain, his fear, his helplessness."

"Harry," said Neville in a tone that was, for him, unusually sharp. "What do you think about me for what I did to Lestranger?"

The starkness of Neville's question took him aback. He thought for a few seconds. "You weren't yourself, Neville."

"So, you wouldn't blame me for what I did. I know the situations were very different, but you have a lot of legitimate anger at Malfoy. And it was a surprise to see him there, you didn't have time to prepare. Your emotions took over, and it's understandable. And you wouldn't want to make us feel bad about enjoying it, would you?"

Despite his discomfort, Harry smiled. "Of course not." He held up a hand as he heard Ginny in his head. Still smiling, he said, "She says you guys are getting her all worked up, now she really wants to see it." To her, he added, "I promise to show you as soon as we're done at the Dursleys'." He then explained to the others what had to be done there.

"Harry, you forgot to mention me," said Hermione. "I've never been to your place, I should go too."

"It would probably be better if you took a few days off, Hermione," said Harry, as Neville nodded his approval.

"Well, maybe," she reluctantly agreed, "but I should do at least the first few hours of the next shift, so they can use the time to teach Ron and Pansy how to Apparate; neither knows yet."

Harry sighed; her suggestion was reasonable, but there was another consideration, one he'd hoped not to have to bring up. "I understand, and that does make sense. But there's another thing." He took out his wand and cast on himself the measuring spell Kingsley had taught him. "Kingsley taught me this a while ago. Would you cast Blue on me?"

She looked both surprised and offended. "You think I can't do it?"

"I think it's possible," he admitted. "You've been through a lot."

She gave him a dirty look, then closed her eyes and tried to calm herself. She opened her eyes and cast Blue at him, silently. A gold 93 appeared in the air beside him. She put her wand away, walked to a wall, leaned against it, and started to sob. Neville walked over and held her as the others watched somberly. In Harry's head, Ginny asked him what her score was, and he told her. "Damn," he heard her say.

Miserable, Hermione held Neville and said, "This is because of Skeeter, obviously. Boy, I'm going to be stepping on every beetle I see for the rest of my life. You never know when you might get lucky."

Harry hated to say it, but knew he should. "Unfortunately, Hermione, it's that very kind of thinking—"

"I know that, Harry," she half-shouted, shooting him an angry look. "There's just nothing else in me right now, all right? I don't need you to tell me that. I'm amazed I got as much as 93, when I think about it. She's only done her best to humiliate me, hurt my friends, try to get Neville to leave me, and make his already enormous suffering worse. How much more has to happen until I'm justified in feeling this way?"

Ginny spoke in Harry's head. "Ginny says, 'He was making a factual statement, Hermione, not trying to judge you. He probably shouldn't have said that right then, but he didn't mean anything by it,'" said Harry, feeling odd in relaying a message that defended him.

Hermione sighed and held onto Neville more tightly. "I know, Ginny, I know Harry's not like that. It's just that, you're right, it just wasn't the best time to say that." Harry silently nodded, his heart going out to her. She touched Neville's face, on the verge of more tears. "Thank goodness I still have you."

"You always will," he assured her. They held each other again, and there was silence. Harry heard Ginny say in his head, "It's a quarter to noon, Harry. You should give Ron and Pansy the tour, if you're going to."

Harry relayed this to the room. "She's right, we should get going. Ginny and I will come by later, if that's okay."

"I thought we might go back to the Burrow, actually," said Neville. "I've been here for over a day now, it would be nice to have a change of scenery. You can meet us there." Harry nodded, and he, Pansy, and Ron said goodbye and left.

After Kingsley confirmed that Ron could do the spells, Harry, Ron, and Pansy headed off for the Aurors' fireplace to go to the Dursleys'. Harry had asked if Ron and Pansy needed to be authorized, but Kingsley had explained that the Aurors' fireplaces were special; no fireplaces were unauthorized when accessed from there.

Harry came through the Dursleys' fireplace first, followed by Ron, then Pansy. Dudley, watching TV in the living room, turned it off and got up. "Hi, Harry, Ron, Pansy. Ready for the tour?"

Harry remembered that Dudley had met them all at King's Cross a few weeks ago, so there was no need for introductions. Ron looked around and said, "Oh, yeah, I was here once before. Didn't see that much of the house, though."

Dudley looked at Ron askance. "Yeah, I remember that time. Kind of hard to forget."

Remembering, Ron said defensively, "That wasn't me, that was my brothers. And they've done plenty worse to me, believe me."

"Somehow, I believe it," said Dudley. "Well, this is the living room, obviously."

"This is the likeliest place for an attack," said Harry, "though, really, there isn't going to be one. We have Malfoy, no one else is going to bother."

Puzzled, Pansy asked, "Why are we here, then?"

"To humor Mum," replied Dudley. "She doesn't care what problems you lot have, she just has to make sure the chances of anything happening to me are zero. Glad she

isn't like this about non-magical things, I'd have never been allowed out of the house."

"Well, to be fair, you were almost killed," said Harry. "I can sort of understand why she doesn't believe us when we say it's not going to happen again."

Dudley shrugged. "Maybe. Anyway, I'll show you the upstairs." They went upstairs, first to Petunia and Vernon's bedroom. "You don't really need to know this one," said Dudley, "nothing ever happens in here." He snickered at his own joke. "And this is Harry's bedroom, or was."

"Aren't they going to change it into something else?" asked Harry.

"They've talked about it, but haven't done anything yet. Maybe they're waiting, hoping you'll come back." Harry and Dudley laughed, while Ron and Pansy exchanged puzzled looks.

They walked into the next room. "This is my bedroom," said Dudley.

"The second likeliest spot for an attack," said Harry, "assuming anyone happens to know that it's his bedroom, which they won't. Say, it's much cleaner than I remember."

Dudley grunted. "Yeah, she made me spend all morning cleaning it up, because you guys were coming. Doesn't like wizards, but she wouldn't want them to think we're a bunch of slobs. Can't figure that out."

"I thought she cleaned your room for you," said Harry.

"Used to, but she started finding stuff I didn't want her to find, so I told her I'd do it myself. Only problem with that is, I

have to actually do it."

"Life is rough," said Harry, deadpan. Dudley nodded.

"What's this?" asked Ron, "another one of those television things?"

"No, it's a computer," replied Dudley. "Oh, that reminds me, you guys are on the internet! Did you know that?" He sat down and started calling up the page.

"Yeah, we heard about it recently," said Harry. The page loaded onto the screen, showing pictures of each of the six, with Harry, Hermione, and Ron on top, followed by Ginny, Neville, and Pansy below.

"Hey, why am I third?" asked Ron in what Harry assumed was feigned annoyance. "I was his friend before Hermione, I should be second."

"Maybe they wanted to keep it boy-girl-boy," Dudley suggested.

"Cute how they make it so that the couples are above and below each other," commented Pansy. "But I thought there were biographies. Where are they?"

"You click on the picture, and it takes you to that person's page," explained Dudley. He clicked on Ron's picture, and they leaned forward to read the biography.

"Hey, they don't mention Harry and I saving Hermione from the troll!" protested Ron. "These people need to do better research."

"You could send them a suggested biography, Ron," teased Pansy. "Or updates, at least. They'd probably want to know

that you can use the energy-of-love spells now."

"What, this happened recently?" asked Dudley.

"Yes, today, for the first time, actually," replied Pansy.

"How does that work, anyway?" asked Dudley, obviously curious. "Is there anything special you have to do or learn to be able to do them?"

Obviously recalling what had happened with Harry and Ron the day before, Pansy and Harry burst out laughing. Now looking truly annoyed, Ron said, "You guys had better not say one word..."

"What?" asked Dudley.

Harry stopped laughing and said, "Well, Ron knows plenty of embarrassing things about me, so I'd better not say. But it's different for each person. You read about what happened with me, that should give you some idea."

Dudley smirked. "Yeah, it looked pretty embarrassing for you. I couldn't believe you talked about stuff like that."

Harry gave Dudley a look similar to one he'd given him earlier. "Yes, Dudley, but once again I call your attention to the fact--"

"That it saved my life, and so I should shut up and stop making jokes about it, right?" finished Dudley, looking resigned. "It just begs to be made fun of, though. Didn't a lot of people at your school make fun of it, when you found it?"

Harry looked at Ron and Pansy. "You two would know better than me. People really didn't joke about it to me."

"The fact is, Dudley," explained Ron, "that people were too busy being awestruck to make fun of it that much. This was a major, huge discovery. This internet thing doesn't talk about that?"

"It does, a bit. There's not much information about it, though."

"That's because there's not much information about it, period. I'm the one who discovered it, I have to find out the information." Harry paused, then glanced at Ron and Pansy. "With a little help from my friends."

Dudley chuckled. "The Beatles."

Startled, Pansy looked around. "Beetles? Where?"

"No, Pansy, he didn't see any beetles," Harry assured her. "It's a Muggle musical group that he meant. The last words I said happen to be a famous song title." To Dudley, he explained, "We're having a little problem with one particular beetle right now, one that won't leave us alone."

"I could go get some bug spray," offered Dudley.

Ron chuckled. "That sounds like a really good idea, actually. Why didn't we think of that?"

"Unfortunately, Dudley, this is a beetle who is also a witch," said Harry. "It's a long story, but she's been harassing us, following us around." He went on to explain how being an Animagus worked.

"Cool!" enthused Dudley. "I'd be a wolf. Or maybe a cheetah, one of those ones that can run really fast."

"No, problem is, you don't get to choose what you are. You could end up a raccoon, or a penguin, or an aardvark."

"Hmmm, maybe I wouldn't bother then," said Dudley. "Oh, yeah, I remember you telling me about the one who was a rat. Can you imagine working on it for three years, and then finding out you're a rat?"

"Yes, that would be bad," agreed Ron.

"Okay, well, let's go downstairs," suggested Harry. "We need to finish up and get Ginny over here."

They walked down the stairs and headed for the living room, but Ron stopped in the hall under the stairs, and pointed to the cupboard under the stairs. "Harry, is this--"

"Yep," Harry said. "Where I slept until I was eleven."

"But there are two bedrooms upstairs!" exclaimed Pansy, aghast. "Why weren't you in the other one?"

"That was Dudley's second bedroom, for his extra stuff," said Harry.

Ron and Pansy stared at Dudley, disbelievingly. "You had to mention that..." muttered Dudley, embarrassed.

Harry found that his current life circumstances were sufficiently good that he didn't feel horribly scarred by his earlier hardships. Looking at Ron and Pansy, he said, "Look, I do want it to be clear that I don't blame Dudley for that. My aunt and uncle didn't want me, hated the idea that I was magical, and raised me as if I were a guest who had overstayed his welcome. One of the ways their unhappiness with me showed was that they went way out of their way to treat Dudley as the 'real' son, the one they were proud of,

and me as someone who didn't matter. My point is that they did that, not Dudley. Dudley was raised to think that that was the natural situation, to have two bedrooms, to have every argument between us decided in his favor. You don't stop to think, 'hey, this is unfair,' if it's unfair in your favor, when you're a kid."

"But why did your aunt and uncle treat you like that?" asked Pansy, obviously feeling sympathy for Harry. "It wasn't like you were a bad person or anything."

Harry paused to think for a few seconds before answering. "Obviously, I spent a lot of time wondering about that. When I was a kid, I thought there must be something wrong with me, otherwise why would they treat me that way? My best guess is that they resented having to raise me when they didn't want to, and because I'm a wizard. If there's another reason, I sure don't know what it is."

Pansy turned to Dudley. "Do you know why, Dudley? Did they ever say anything to you about it?"

Though clearly uncomfortable with the topic, Dudley tried to answer anyway; Harry wondered if it was partly because he felt guilty for his part in how Harry had been treated. "They did, but nothing that would answer the question. They just always told me, for as long as I can remember, that he was a bad influence, that he was the sort of person you didn't associate with, that he was strange. Funny thing is, they never said why exactly, and I never thought to ask. I just accepted it. I do remember there were a few times when we were getting along, doing something together and having fun, and they would pull me aside, act as though I'd done something seriously wrong, and send me to my room. It was just easier to... give him a hard time. They had no problem with that. But beyond that, if there was another reason

except for his being a wizard, I really couldn't say what it was."

Standing behind Harry, Pansy put her arms around him, her hands joining at his stomach. Embarrassed, he patted her hand. "Really, Pansy, it's okay. I don't think about it that much anymore. My life is really good now—well, except for the people trying to kill me, that's not so good—but I have you guys, I have Ginny, I still get to talk to Albus, there's lots of good stuff in my life. If what happened then was a trade for what I have now, it would be totally worth it. I'm really not complaining, and you shouldn't feel sorry for me."

She let go of him. "It's kind of hard not to, but if you say so." Looking at Dudley, she said, "Well, if he doesn't blame you, Dudley, then I don't either. Also, anyone who kicks Malfoy in the head a couple of times is all right with me."

Dudley grinned. "Seemed the least I could do, after he tried to kill me."

Harry saw Ron looking closely at the floor. "What is it?"

"Nothing, I just thought I saw something. Maybe I'm just being jumpy, after what Pansy said about beetles."

Hearing Ron say that gave Harry an idea. He suddenly grabbed his robe at the waist and shook it vigorously. A beetle hit the floor and started skittering away.

"Dudley! Quick, find a jar!" shouted Harry. Dudley ran toward the kitchen, only to stop in amazement as the beetle started to change form, sprouting arms, legs, and a torso. In a few seconds, Rita Skeeter was standing in front of them. Dudley gaped in shock.

"No, thanks, I've spent more than enough time in a jar, thanks to the lovely and charming Miss Granger." Giving Harry a contemptuous look, she added, "Took you long enough to think of doing that. Snape's right, you really aren't too bright."

Harry tried to calm his mounting anger. "Get the hell out of—no, wait, I have an idea." He walked up to her and reached for her head. She reflexively backed off. He gave her a hard stare and said, "I'll do this with or without your cooperation." She raised her eyebrows but said nothing. He reached over, found a strand of hair, and pulled sharply. He carefully placed the hair into a pocket in his robe. "Okay, now you can get the hell out of here."

She regarded him with scorn and amusement. "Well, that wasn't very energy-of-love-ish of you, now, was it? Why, it's difficult to think that this is the same person who exchanged such tender words with Ron just yesterday." Harry glanced over and saw Ron looking furious. "I'll go, Harry, because it suits me to just now, but you, me, and Granger need to have a little chat. Now that I'm out in the open, things are different. I'll meet you at the Burrow at one o'clock tomorrow, just the three of us. We'll talk outside, wouldn't want to be overheard." She smiled at the irony of her own comment. Turning her back, she walked to the fireplace and threw in some Floo powder, shouted "Diagon Alley!" and was gone.

The four exchanged looks, no one saying anything for a moment. Finally Dudley asked, "Why did you take that hair from her?"

"To make a detector, like your pendant," said Harry. "They can use this to make something that'll let us know when she's around. Boy, that was annoying."

"That was the weirdest thing I've ever seen," said Dudley fervently. "Wait till I tell Mum and Dad. Then again, maybe I'd better not."

"It would really reinforce their idea that all wizards are freaks," noted Harry. "Well, it's been too long as it is, better get you guys back and get Ginny out here. Dudley, I'll be back with Ginny in five minutes or so."

They went into the fireplace, and five minutes later, Harry came out again, followed by Ginny. She and Dudley exchanged greetings, and she looked at his feet. Puzzled, he asked, "What is it?"

"I just wanted to look at your shoes," she said. "Was hoping they were steel-toed or something."

He shook his head. "No, afraid not. Don't usually kick people, but it just seemed the right thing to do in his case. Well, let's do the tour." They started walking through the house, in the same order as with Ron and Ginny. When they got to Dudley's bedroom, Ginny looked at the computer, which was still displaying Ron's picture and biography.

"Oh, this is that internet thing! I want to see the one about me," said Ginny. Dudley called up the page, and she started reading. "Seems fairly accurate. I'm surprised they found out about me being able to do the spells already. I didn't think that was public knowledge, nothing's been in the Prophet about it."

Dudley was reading along with her. "Why does it say that you two are 'expected to be married in the next few years?' Are you engaged or something?"

"Not formally," explained Harry, "but you already read about the Joining of Hands. Since that's irreversible, everyone

understands that it means we intend to be together for the rest of our lives. We'll probably get married after Ginny graduates from Hogwarts."

"Well, congratulations," said Dudley. "So, are you guys... you know..."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Dudley..." he said in annoyance.

Ginny turned from looking at the computer screen, eyes sparkling. "Well, Dudley, he did discover the energy of love. It'd be kind of stupid of me to let that go to waste, wouldn't it?"

Dudley and Ginny grinned as Harry moaned and looked away in embarrassment. "You're really going to go to town with me right now, aren't you," asked Harry plaintively.

"It is very tempting," agreed Ginny. To Dudley, she said, "He embarrasses so easily, I could have his face beet red in a few minutes. But I love him, so I'm not going to do that." She leaned over and kissed him on the lips.

"Very thoughtful of you," said Harry warily, not having decided whether she was joking or not. To Dudley, he warned, "Just wait till you get a girlfriend."

"Oh, I have one," replied Dudley. "She'd never do what Ginny just did, though. She likes to play hard to get. Likes me to chase her."

"No, in our case, I chased Harry. Didn't think I'd ever actually get him, but I did, somehow. I prefer to play easy to get, since it means I can be gotten more."

Dudley grinned at Harry, who couldn't help but grin back. "Like I said, my life is pretty good right now."

"I see what you mean," agreed Dudley. Ginny asked to look at Harry's page, and Dudley called it up. "Wow, even a picture of the front and back of your Chocolate Frog card," she commented. "They can't make it so that your image leaves the card and comes back, though. Bet they could, if there were magical computers."

"That should be a project for your father," said Harry, picturing Arthur's enthusiasm for doing something like that.

"Yeah, he'd like that," agreed Ginny. "We should, I mean, you should get him a computer."

"No, 'we' is right," said Harry. "The money is yours, too, as far as I'm concerned. You should feel free to spend anything you want."

"But we're not married yet—"

"That's really more a technicality," he argued. "But it would make me happy. And you do like to make me happy, don't you?"

She sighed. "You know just what to say, don't you."

Dudley looked confused. "You have money? How? How much?"

"My parents left it to me, and it's forty-odd thousand Galleons. In Muggle terms, about two hundred thirty thousand pounds."

Dudley gaped. "Wow... why didn't you ever spend any of it? Buy yourself stuff?"

"Partly because I didn't know the exact amount at first, and thought I'd better save it, and partly because I didn't want

your parents knowing. They might have decided that as my legal guardians, they were entitled to it."

"Dumbledore would have never let them do that," said Ginny. "And can you imagine them walking up to a Gringotts goblin and asking to get into your vault?"

"Good point, I don't think it would be worth it to them," agreed Harry. "Still, it would have been one more thing for them to harass me about, which I didn't need."

"So, you're going to get her father a computer?" asked Dudley, clearly hoping the conversation wouldn't take the same turn into Harry's childhood that the last one had. "You'd need to get him an internet connection, too, and it's not trivial to get set up. You have to know what you're doing."

"Sounds like a job for Hermione," said Ginny humorously.

He nodded. "Maybe I'll talk to her about it after the Apparation crisis is over. I'm sure she'll want to spend the summer boning up on Transfiguration, though. Well, we've seen the whole place, Ginny, do you think you can Apparate here fast enough to save Dudley's life?"

"I think so," she responded casually. "And Dudley, if I do, and it's Malfoy, you can pay me back by giving him a few more kicks in the head."

Dudley laughed. "I would do that anyway, just for myself. But for you... I'll think of you the next time I go shopping for shoes."

"Good," she said. They headed towards the fireplace. As Harry prepared to throw the Floo powder into the fireplace,

Dudley said, "Oh, Harry, forgot to mention it before, but... thanks for saving my life."

Harry smiled. "Any time."

* * * * *

Back at the Burrow, Harry and Ginny met Hermione and Neville. Harry told them about what had happened with Skeeter. Hermione moaned, "Oh, I don't think I can take meeting with her. Not right now. It's not going to be anything good, that's for sure." Harry found it hard to disagree.

"I was going to go back to the Aurors before Ginny and I went to sleep," he said. "Maybe I can get them to imbue something using that hair so we can know if she's around. I'd really rather not have her following me around. By the way, I wondered, why didn't she show up on those maps you made of Hogwarts last year?"

Hermione shook her head, angry with herself. "That was my fault, an oversight. Animagi don't show up on maps like that unless you do a special charm on them. I forgot to do it, and Remus didn't specifically mention it to me when we talked about it. I'm sure he remembered to do it on his map because the Marauders were all Animagi. There was nothing like that to make me think of it, and I didn't.

"But as for the imbuing, Harry, you don't need to go to the Aurors. I can do that, it's the same charm I used when I charmed the maps to make them go off if Crabbe or Goyle got near you. Just give me the hair and the item you want imbued, and it'll just take a minute. And I won't forget to do the charm that detects Animagi, so it won't matter whether she's a beetle or herself."

"Great, thanks," he said, happy for the peace of mind of knowing that he would no longer be monitored without his knowledge.

"Harry," said Ginny, "You did bring the Pensieve back. I want to see the Malfoy thing, before we forget."

Before Harry could answer, Hermione chimed in, "Yes, I wouldn't mind seeing it again myself." Neville nodded his agreement.

Harry sighed. "Okay, it's in my room, let's go." They went to the boys' bedroom and watched the memory. When they came out of the Pensieve, Ginny smiled at Harry.

"Harry, I have to say, that was really..." Pretending to struggle for words, she ran a hand through Harry's hair and another across his chest in a comically exaggerated, suggestive way. "Neville, Hermione, would you leave us alone for a while?"

The other three laughed heartily as Harry turned pink. "I think you heard me mention that I wasn't totally proud of it," said Harry in a mildly reproofing way.

"Okay, Harry, now I'm going to be serious," said Ginny. "I understand why you feel that way. But think about the fact that I was kidnapped and tortured by Malfoy, and he tried to kill me. He did worse to Pansy. For those of us who suffered because of him, there's something comforting in knowing that you didn't go easy on him when you had the chance. It was like you stood up for us; we know it was mostly because of us, because you care about us, that you were like that. You weren't cruel, you weren't inhuman, you just enjoyed catching him and making him pay, even if only a little bit, for what he'd done. I thoroughly enjoyed that, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that, for knowing that

you'll be tough with people who hurt your friends." She paused. "Also, I really am a little excited."

This time, Harry smiled along with Neville and Hermione. "All right, I understand, I won't argue with you. And as for the other thing, well, we'll be back at my quarters soon. At least we won't have to worry about unwanted visitors, thanks to Hermione."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Do you think she's..."

"Wouldn't surprise me," he said, trying not to think about it. "She was clearly with Ron and I for our session yesterday, all she had to do was stay in my robes for a little while longer."

Hermione's face reflected her disgust. "That's sick. Of course, it's no more sick than the other stuff she's done, but still... well, give me that hair, I'll get to work on imbuing... what should I imbue?"

Ginny took off a ring and handed it to Hermione. Harry shrugged. "Don't suppose you have any more of those fake Galleons? Except for the pendant, there's nothing I carry around with me all the time."

"A Galleon it is," she agreed. "Yes, I have a few in my trunk." She got up and headed to her room.

"How are you doing, Neville?" asked Ginny.

Neville shrugged. "Not so bad. Much better than yesterday would be a good way to put it."

Ginny looked at him sadly. "I haven't really had a chance a chance to talk to you since it happened, and I just wanted to say..." She trailed off, then walked to him and hugged him, holding him tightly.

"Thank you for saying that, Ginny," said Neville, as he returned the hug. "I appreciate it. I suppose it'll take some time to get used to it, but what happened today was a big help. Being able to see her talk to me like that... I wish every person who lost someone got to do that." He let go of Ginny.

"Would've saved me a lot of grief if I'd gotten to do that with Sirius," agreed Harry. "Especially since I felt I was largely responsible for his death. He probably would have told me I wasn't, and that I shouldn't think about it."

"Me too, Harry, of course. You saw what Gran said about that."

"Yes, Neville, but I didn't understand what she was referring to. I didn't want to ask you, because I felt like it was just my place to relay the message."

Neville took a deep breath before speaking. "It was one of the things that Hermione and I were fighting about in the weeks before Gran was killed, in fact, even before we left Hogwarts. She thought I should come live at the Burrow too, and that security precautions should be taken at my place. I thought she was just trying to get me to come to the Burrow because she wanted to be around me, and I was flattered, but I knew how Gran would feel about it, and I said no without even asking her. Hermione was persistent, so finally I talked to Gran about the idea of our safety, and she refused to do anything differently. Ironically, today Hermione was apologizing for all the things she was wrong about, but she was right about this one. I felt like, if I had listened to her, maybe this wouldn't have happened."

Harry shook his head. "You know how your grandmother was, Neville. It wouldn't have mattered what you had said. She wouldn't have changed her mind."

"I know, really. It's just hard not to think about things like that."

"Boy, I can really understand that," said Harry, feeling that it was an understatement.

"Where are you going to live now, Neville?" asked Ginny. "I mean, somehow living alone in that house doesn't seem like such a good idea."

"Well, I probably wouldn't be in that much actual danger," said Neville. "I mean, I'm still not a high-priority target, and—"

"After what you called Voldemort?" asked Harry incredulously. "I think you made the high-priority target list, Neville. He takes that kind of thing pretty seriously. I'm sure he's really angry that you said that to him and lived."

"Hmmm, hadn't thought of it that way. You may be right. Anyway, my house might be safe enough, since I have the adrenaline detector in the pendants, but I suppose they could get me while I was asleep or something. So, yes, I wasn't going to stay there. I was going to stay with the Aurors for a few days, then come here. Cassandra wants me to stay so she can keep an eye on me, she wants to help me get better. But, yes, I will be here soon."

"We'll be happy to have you, Neville," said Harry.

Neville nodded. "I knew that already, of course. But thanks."

Hermione walked into the room and, with great satisfaction, handed the ring to Ginny and the Galleon to Harry. "There you go, one guaranteed beetle-free afternoon of sleep. How did you get the hair from her, anyway? I wouldn't think she'd just give it to you."

"I kind of threatened her," admitted Harry. "I walked up to her to take it, and when she backed away, I said, 'I'll do this with or without your cooperation.' She didn't protest, and I took it."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Harry. Like Ginny said, you're sticking up for your friends."

Giving Harry a significant look, Ginny said, "Harry, let's get back to Hogwarts. *Now*." Fawkes burst into view as Hermione and Neville laughed, and Harry and Ginny grabbed his tail and were gone.

Harry walked into Snape's office later that evening at a few minutes after ten. Harry had not been surprised that Snape had called, as Snape had warned that he might, but it was the third straight night. Maybe he abstained too long when the Apparation crisis started, Harry had thought.

"Good evening, Professor," said Harry. "How's the schedule coming along?"

"Not so well," Snape replied. "I can tell you that you will have a particularly busy year, as you must teach the N.E.W.T. classes as well. I have tried to keep your schedule as similar to last year as possible, but some changes must of course be made. I was considering the possibility of consolidating your seventh year class, having all students in it rather than two separate classes, as is normal."

Harry shrugged. "Whatever you think is best. What made you think of doing that?"

"Mostly, last year's decimation of the sixth year Slytherin boys' ranks, which meant that the Slytherin/Ravenclaw class was reduced to nine students by the end of last year. Combining them would mean one class of twenty-four

members, which is manageable, and would give you one less class in your already busy schedule."

"That sounds good, thanks," said Harry agreeably.

"There is one development of which you should be aware," Snape went on. "I received an owl today from Mr. Zabini, who states that he wishes to be included in the N.E.W.T. Defense Against the Dark Arts class."

Harry nodded. "And...?"

Snape looked mildly annoyed, as if Harry should have anticipated the rest. "It is a highly irregular request, as he did not take the class in sixth year. Normally one cannot take the seventh year class if one does not take the sixth year class. I would have immediately refused the request, but such decisions are up to the discretion of the professor teaching the class, that is, you. I anticipated that you would approve the request."

"And you were right," confirmed Harry.

"I do not particularly care, but I would advise you to reconsider such a cavalier attitude," said Snape, in a tone which Harry felt conveyed Snape's conviction that Harry was acting stupidly. "Not only are there excellent reasons for disallowing such a request in general, but particularly in Mr. Zabini's case. His skills in this subject are very poor, to put it mildly. Even before Mr. Longbottom's improvement, Mr. Zabini made Mr. Longbottom look like an Auror by comparison."

"Somehow I think he'll do better this year," argued Harry.

"Remember, his dormitory-mates were Malfoy, Goyle, Crabbe, and Nott. From what I heard, they were always really

abusive to him, treated him terribly, because he was shy and didn't stand up for himself very well."

"He was weak, is what you mean to say," retorted Snape.

Harry found he didn't like Snape's attitude, and reminded himself that he was there to help Snape. He tried to focus on love. "You make it sound like what happened to him was his fault. I don't like to think of how it would have been if it had been me in there instead of him."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You would have fought. You might have lost every fight, but you still would have fought." To Harry's surprised look, Snape continued, "I was told of your detentions with Dolores Umbridge, Professor. Of course you would have fought. You fought me for five years; you never allowed yourself to be cowed, as did Mr. Longbottom. Some people fight; some people do not."

Harry smiled a little. "Neville fights now."

Snape nodded in what appeared to be reluctant respect for Neville. "Yes, he does. I assume you are referring to the epithet he used. I imagine you all understand that he is now a high-priority target of the Dark Lord."

"Yes, we were talking about that earlier. Did you hear about what happened today?"

"No, I have not talked to the headmistress today, as she has been busy. I assumed I would learn of today's events in short order." Harry gestured to Snape to go ahead, and Snape did. He started with Harry returning to the Burrow yesterday, and his conversation with Arthur about the Memory Charm he had placed on Molly. He then saw the first Death Eater capture; Harry was impressed by Snape's ability to leap

seamlessly from one significant memory to another, skipping what was unimportant.

Snape came to the Malfoy capture, and Harry saw the images in his mind as Snape accessed them. When Harry cast Legilimens on Malfoy, Snape gave a sudden start; Harry saw him look astonished and pale. "What is it?" asked Harry. Snape didn't answer, but backed up and viewed the scene again until Malfoy was taken away. Snape then viewed it a third time, focusing very closely on the images Harry had seen in Malfoy's mind. Snape then put down his wand, sat back in his chair, and seemed to be focusing on something. "Professor?" asked Harry, wondering what the problem was.

After a minute, Snape answered. "I am making a serious attempt, Professor, to restrain the anger and frustration I feel at your having done something so... breathtakingly foolish."

Harry blinked in surprise. "Do you mean doing Legilimens on him?"

Evenly, Snape replied, "Yes, Professor, that is what I mean. At least you have discerned that much. Perhaps, as an exercise, you may want to try to work out why what you did was so terrible an idea."

Harry was starting to become annoyed at Snape's criticism, though relatively muted as it was, and embarrassed at the idea that there was something obvious he had overlooked. He tried to focus on love and think critically at the same time. After a minute he said, "The only thing I can think of is that if he had a wand, he could have struck back, and seen something in my mind, like us talking. But he didn't have a wand."

"Wandless magic is not unheard of, as you well know," pointed out Snape. "That was one danger of what you did;

though a low-probability danger, it was still not worth risking in the situation. But the larger danger, which I am astonished that you continue to overlook, was not what he would see, but what you would see. You could easily have seen him talking to me; I do talk to various Death Eaters at times, including him. If you had seen him talking to me, he would have known you had seen it, and therefore known that you knew me to be working for the Dark Lord. He would then expect you to convey this information to the headmistress, and I would be discharged and arrested; my being allowed to stay a Hogwarts professor after your seeing such a thing would have raised too much suspicion. I could still have 'escaped' and functioned as a spy against the Dark Lord, but not as a Hogwarts professor, which is where my true utility to him lies, or so he thinks.

"Naturally, in such a scenario, the damage would not be irretrievable. Mr. Malfoy would not immediately be able to communicate the information to the Dark Lord, but it must always be assumed that any Death Eater could escape at any time. The logical course would then have been the elimination of Mr. Malfoy, as he had information which would damage us should it reach the Dark Lord, and that could not be risked."

It took a minute for what Snape had said to register. "You mean... if I had seen him talking to you, you would have had him killed?"

"Strictly speaking, such a thing is not within my purview. I would have relayed the information to the headmistress and Mr. Shacklebolt, who would then have had to make the decision. I believe they would have made the correct choice; they are both realists, and even the small possibility of the Dark Lord getting such information is unacceptable. As events occurred, you saw nothing that could incriminate me,

and so the headmistress and Mr. Shackbolt were spared such a decision. However, what concerned me was not so much the question of whether Mr. Malfoy's death would have to be arranged, but rather the stark realization that my life and my utility to the Order are in the hands of one capable of such a stunning misjudgment."

Harry now felt very embarrassed. Snape was obviously right; he should have thought about the consequences of doing Legilimens on a Death Eater. He thought of apologizing, but immediately realized that an apology would mean nothing to Snape. He kept his expression even, saying nothing.

Snape continued speaking. "I can hear the words of the headmaster in my mind. 'He is only seventeen, Severus. He is doing the best he can.' That may be true, but you are sitting, as they say, at the adults' table now. Lapses of judgment can cost lives, and of those more important than Mr. Malfoy. Perhaps I should attempt to tutor you in elements of tactical decision-making as it applies to such situations. I may be unable to offer opinions on love and morality, but I can give guidance on clear-headed thinking. It seems that such a thing could be useful to you."

Harry understood that Snape did not intend to be insulting—in fact, was going out of his way to avoid it—but he still had to struggle to react to Snape's suggestion dispassionately. "I'm not in a position to argue with you," he said. "I'd be interested in whatever you had to say, as these situations come up." He knew he could learn from Snape, even if he'd rather not, and he wondered if he would one day lose the life of one of his friends to such a misjudgment. He did his best to swallow his pride.

That night was a slow one, from Harry's point of view; there were no Apparations, so it was beginning to appear that the

information Harry had pulled from Malfoy was accurate. Near the end of the shift, Kingsley told Harry and Ginny that this might be their last one, and he would let them know for sure sometime that evening. In the meantime, he advised them to stick to their current sleep schedule for at least one more day. As they went off shift, Harry remembered that he and Hermione had to talk to Rita Skeeter in an hour. He wasn't looking forward to it, and he wondered how Hermione was dealing with the prospect of coming face to face with her tormentor.

At a few minutes to one, Harry and Hermione sat in conjured chairs in the Weasleys' front yard. Glancing at Hermione, Harry saw that she seemed to be trying hard to concentrate; he hoped it was on the energy of love. "How're you doing?"

"I'm reminding myself of the reasons not to actually kill her," she responded, looking straight ahead.

Harry nodded, as if it were the answer he expected. "Good idea."

In the distance, they saw the Knight Bus appear out of nowhere. It came toward the Burrow, and stopped. Rita Skeeter got out and walked up to them, wearing a cheery smile. "Hello. Lovely day, isn't it?"

Hermione was stonily silent, staring at Skeeter with undisguised loathing. Harry decided that he should speak as much as possible so Hermione wouldn't have to. "Okay, Skeeter, we're here. What did you want to talk about?"

Skeeter sat down in the chair Harry had already conjured. "Well, first, I'd really like to have a discussion with our dear Hermione about the moral issues involved in our little situation. It seems she thinks I'm evil, or something along those lines."

"'Evil' doesn't come close to covering it," spat Hermione in disgust. "You know what you did, you know what you tried to do. You're not going to fool anybody by pretending it wasn't evil."

Skeeter shrugged lightly. "It wasn't nice, I'll grant you, though 'evil' seems like too strong a word. Nothing I said in those letters wasn't the truth. Is it evil to tell people the truth? Maybe it is, when people don't want to know the truth, when they'd rather close their eyes to who they really are. But that's all I ever did, as a journalist. You were angry with me for revealing that Hagrid was a half-giant, but it was the truth."

Harry decided to jump in before Hermione responded. "Everything you write has information taken out which would help to tell the truth if you put it in. You want people to think a certain thing, and you write to fit that. For example, Pansy didn't tell Ron about the thing with Malfoy because she wanted to spare him pain, not because it wouldn't 'concern him.' Hermione and Ginny were concerned about Pansy and Ron's relationship, not thinking they 'couldn't make it work.' It's all—"

"'Twisted and distorted,' yes, I've heard you say that," agreed Skeeter pleasantly. "But it could be true that Pansy didn't think it would concern Ron. How would I know? It's a reasonable extrapolation. And if Ron and Pansy broke up over him bringing up her past, couldn't you accurately say that they 'couldn't make it work,' and that was what Ginny and Hermione were talking about? I really reject your premise that you can't present a certain point of view when writing an article and still have it be true."

"Hugo doesn't do that," argued Harry.

Skeeter laughed derisively. "Ah, Brantell... yes, Harry, he does do that, he just does it in your favor. Like you said with your cousin, you don't worry that things aren't fair if they're not fair in your favor. He omits information from his articles that would make you look bad if he put it in, because he likes you. It's no different than what I do. So I don't condemn him for it; anybody in the journalism trade understands that any article is going to have a point of view. Intelligent readers," Skeeter emphasized the word with a glance at Hermione, "understand that as well, and filter the article accordingly. Journalism would be extremely boring if there was no point of view."

"So it's all right to leave people with an impression that isn't true?" pressed Harry.

"As I said, smart people will recognize the article's point of view, and adjust for it when they read," replied Skeeter. "And if they're not smart enough to, well, too bad for them. I don't write just for stupid people to be able to understand, and fortunately, the Prophet doesn't make me."

"Skeeter," said Hermione, trying to stay in control of her emotions, "I really have better things to do than listen to your pathetic rationalizations for what you do, and every minute I spend with you is a minute I have to try very hard not to vomit. So could we please speed this up?"

"Why, of course, Hermione," sneered Skeeter, in a tone that suggested that Hermione was a child who needed to be placated, "because you know there's nothing I'd rather do than make you happy." Her tone suddenly hardening, she continued, "Vomit all you want, for all I care. You're no better than me, for sure. You created me, in fact. Ask Harry, he understands it. He had interesting conversations about it, about you, the other day, with Ginny, then with Snape. He

was wrestling with the morality of what you did to me, which is clearly more than you did. If you had, you would probably have no problems with me right now."

Hermione stared at Skeeter silently. Skeeter raised her eyebrows, as if Hermione had asked an interesting question. "And what was the result of these conversations? Why, I'm glad you asked. As Harry will tell you, Ginny and Snape both, in very different ways, reached the conclusion that you prevented me from writing for reasons of revenge, not because you wanted to protect yourself and your friends from my awful point of view. You could have, as Snape very intelligently pointed out, let me keep writing, just made sure I didn't write anything that you disapproved of. That would have been annoying, but livable; I would have just had to write to the point of view that you would want. It would have been an interesting challenge. But instead, I had to sit at home and twiddle my thumbs. Or, as Ginny put it, sit around with nothing to do but nurse a grudge. She's smart, Harry, smarter than you are."

Skeeter, becoming more emotionally intense, leaned forward and stared at Hermione. "Yes, Granger, this is revenge. I'm not going to make any bones about that. But you shouldn't be surprised about any of this, and the only reason you are points to the fact that you think you know best, but you really don't. You're paying now for a mistake you made when you were fourteen, a mistake that cost me a lot. You were just a kid, a hurt and offended little girl with far more brains than common sense. You thought, 'oh, I know, I'll stop her from writing for a while! She lies, she's a bad woman, so I'll be doing a good thing!' You had, you have, no idea how it feels to sit at home and stare at the walls, to be prevented from doing something you love and you're good at. The punishment you imposed on me was hugely out of proportion to what I had done. Should it really surprise you

that my thoughts turned to the question of getting back at you, at teaching you a lesson? Did you not think about the fact that people would wonder why I stopped writing, and would ask me questions about it that I couldn't really answer? How that made me look to my friends, my family? But no, you were right. You're always right.

"I'm not trying to get you to feel sorry for me, Granger. I really don't care. But I would like you to at least know what you did, because I don't think you really did. Harry was right when talking to Ginny—you're getting back what you put out, only more. But I'm not even sure that it's that much more. For your hurt feelings, you wrecked my life. You're still going to think I'm the moral equivalent of a Death Eater, but you might want to take a look in the mirror. You're responsible for this, you caused this. Maybe next time you won't wreck people's lives without a thought or a care."

Hermione still looked stony; Harry thought he saw flashes of uncertainty in her eyes once or twice, but wasn't sure. As for Skeeter, he still thought that what she had done was cold-hearted and cruel, but he had to admit that he hadn't thought through what Hermione's actions had done to Skeeter.

Hermione finally spoke. "You were an unregistered Animagus," she said coldly. "You used your ability to do things you knew would hurt people. You wouldn't have found out about Hagrid being half-giant if you weren't an Animagus. People have reasonable expectations of privacy. If they see no people around, they think they're alone. If I made a mistake, it was in not simply turning you in. Then you would have never written again, and would you blame me for wrecking your life? Or yourself for doing something against the law?"

Skeeter scoffed. "Oh, please. You don't think parents had a right to know that Hagrid is half-giant? They thought they did, when they found out. If what I did hurt people, well, the truth hurts, as you've been finding out lately. And I laugh at your scolding of me for breaking the law. There are laws against blackmail, which you may be finding out soon. You're right, you should have just exposed me. I wondered why you didn't; I assumed it was that you wanted me in your back pocket for some reason, like to get me to do that stupid article about him a year and a half ago. For no pay, adding insult to injury. Which reminds me, I also haven't been getting paid for a while, another thing you neglected to consider in your little punishment scheme. Or if you did consider it, you didn't care.

"Well, enough about the past. You're probably too angry to feel anything except self-righteous, too stubborn to admit that you were anything but totally correct in what you did. So let's move on to the future. You can be my friend, or my enemy. If you choose to be my enemy, believe me, there's plenty I can do to make your lives miserable. Those letters were just a hint of it, to let you understand what you could be letting yourselves in for.

"If you choose to be my friend, there are some considerations I will expect in return. Those considerations don't involve you much, Granger, because there's little you could do that would be of benefit to me. But you," she said, smiling and turning to Harry, "there's a lot you could do for me. First of all, interviews with you anytime I wanted, on whatever topic. I would replace Brantell as your personal journalist; I'd even be willing to write from your 'point of view,' like he does. You wouldn't have to worry about looking bad. You're the future star of the wizarding world, Harry. You'll be better-known and more well-respected than even

Dumbledore was. It would do me good to have that kind of access to you.

"Secondly, as you know, I may be up on charges for being an unregistered Animagus. I have friends, people who can help me game the system, but another never hurts. I would want and expect you to use your influence, which is now considerable, to intervene on my behalf. You have clout, even if you don't like to use it. It's possible that I could even escape any form of punishment altogether, end up with a slap on the wrist.

"Thirdly, I suffered quite a bit from my enforced layoff, as I've mentioned, partly due to a lack of income. I would like to be compensated for that, in the sum of twenty thousand Galleons. I would ask it of her, but she doesn't have it, and she can't exactly ask it of her parents and tell them it's for hair care products, though she could really use them. So I ask it from you; you do have it, you're not using it, and you are culpable in that you knew what she was doing to me and said nothing. I know that it's more than I would have earned as salary during that time, but part of it is... punitive, a term that our innocent little Hermione should understand very well, as what she did to me was highly punitive. There are other small details concerning what it would take to be my friend, but those are the important ones."

Harry mentally recoiled; each of the demands was hard to contemplate acceding to. He was disgusted by the idea of giving access to Skeeter, even if it was to be favorable, and helping her avoid charges was exactly the kind of thing he did not want to use his influence for. The request for twenty thousand Galleons was also anathema, though more on principle than because of the financial loss.

Hermione was obviously having similar thoughts. Looking appalled, she said, "Harry, under no circumstances are you even going to consider what she is suggesting. There is no way you are going to agree to this."

Skeeter smiled. "I expected that reaction from you, of course. Harry here looks like he's considering it, or at least, not rejecting it. But before we ask him for an opinion, it's probably good to know the consequences of being my enemy.

"First, Harry, I have had a lot of free time over the past two years, and as you've guessed, I've spent a lot of it with you. Her, too, and your friends, but especially you. Mostly I've been hanging onto the inside of your robes, as I was today when it finally occurred to you to shake them out. This was not exactly comfortable at times, especially that day when Ginny 'jumped in the deep end.' When you did that, with your robe..." Skeeter wore a look of disgust, and rolled her eyes, "that was something I really, really didn't want to see, especially not from that angle."

Harry wondered if she was trying to deliberately anger him, or to let him know details of what she knew that could be used later to embarrass him. Hermione's face reflected her confusion as Harry tried to control his growing feelings of rage. Fury in his eyes, he stared at Skeeter. "You weren't invited."

She shrugged, as if not noticing his reaction. "True, but I thought you should know that what I've done hasn't been easy at times for me. Anyway, back to the subject, I know how much you dislike being in the public eye, even though it is mostly in a favorable way. You would really rather nothing was written about you at all. Well, after my being around you all this time, it shouldn't surprise you to learn

that I have quite a bit of information about you; voluminous, you could say. More than enough to write a book. I'm three-quarters done, in fact. I haven't decided on a title yet... I'm thinking about, 'The Secret Life of Harry Potter,' and there is quite a bit that's secret about it. It would be a huge bestseller, and I could still do it, even if I end up spending time in prison for being an Animagus." Harry winced inside; the thought of such a book being written, especially in the way she would no doubt write it, was sickening.

"I see you're not thrilled at the idea," she continued, clearly enjoying herself. "I didn't think you would be. Now, Consequence of Being My Enemy No. 2: You could expect me to continue to make your lives highly unpleasant, and not even considering what I might find out in the future, there's plenty that I know now that you would not want known. For example, Granger, naturally your blackmailing of me would be brought to the attention of the authorities. You think you did nothing illegal, but I think you're wrong. That would definitely be put to the test. Also, your parents could find out not only that you're involved in highly dangerous activities, and have been for years, behind their backs, but that you also lied about the reasons for staying at the Burrow, and approved of them being given Memory Charms when their rings were modified. By the time I was done with them, you'd be lucky if they ever wanted to see you again."

Just then, Harry saw the front door of the house open, and Neville walk out towards where they were sitting. Harry was surprised; he assumed Hermione had told him that Skeeter wanted to talk to them alone. Neville walked over to Hermione's chair and without a word, leaned down and gave her a kiss—a long and energetic kiss, far more so than Harry had ever seen Neville do in public before. He knew why, of course, as upon finishing, Neville gave Skeeter a disdainful

glance before heading back into the house. For the first time since the meeting had started, Hermione smiled.

"Well, wasn't that cute," said Skeeter, dripping sarcasm. "And it reminds me, of course, of another of the things that could happen. So many things could come out that would be inconvenient, or worse... Neville's little outburst against Lestranger, not to mention the Aurors' covering it up... Your slip in the Department of Mysteries and your long and close relationship to the convicted murderer Sirius Black are definitely things that would come out in your biography, as well as the fact that you've become a Legilimens... it could be arranged for Molly to be shown a Pensieve memory of your little conversation the day Percy died, not to mention being told about the Memory Charm... it could become publicly known that you talk to dead people in your sleep; people would find that highly interesting, not that it would do much for your credibility... and then, yes, there's that utterly fascinating, not to mention rather peculiar, relationship you have with Professor Snape. It's like he feeds on your memories... kind of bizarre, really. People would be so intrigued to know about it!"

"You couldn't write about that!" Harry almost shouted. Keeping his voice down, he continued, "Embarrassing us is one thing, but that's top secret information. Writing that would cost us Professor Snape as a spy, which I don't think the Prophet is going to let you do, and the Ministry won't let the Prophet do."

"It wouldn't necessarily cost you Professor Snape's services," Skeeter argued. "He could tell Voldemort that he concocted some story to convince you that it was necessary, as a way of gaining access to your memories. Quite ingenious, really."

"Then Voldemort would want to know why he hadn't been getting information from that all along," responded Harry. "Besides, it's too risky. You can't know the consequences."

"But this is only if you decide to be my enemy, Harry," she said sweetly. "You could be my friend, and then we would never have to worry about all this unpleasantness. There are other things, such as the fact that Dumbledore can incapacitate Voldemort, or at least that you think he can—you might be unbalanced in thinking it, of course—and that stuff Hermione rubbed on him, that if you're my friend, you never have to worry about being revealed."

"You wouldn't," said Hermione. "You'd be convicted of treason. That's all highly classified."

Skeeter shrugged. "You may be right. Who knows? What's important is, I'd rather keep you guessing about what I would do or wouldn't do. And there's plenty more that I haven't mentioned, plus whatever I can do or find out in the future. You definitely don't want me as an enemy. So, think it over. You have five days; I want to know by next Monday."

She stood and started walking away. After a few steps, she turned and smiled. "Oh, and Harry... I know it was yesterday, but... happy birthday."

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 5, Harry Potter's Tragic Childhood: A highly unwelcome Rita Skeeter article emphasizes the difficulties that await Harry unless he agrees to her demands.

From Chapter 5: Concerned, Ginny looked closely into his eyes. "Are you scared? About what could happen?"

Harry looked back, understanding that this was what a life partner was for, to talk about how he felt in ways that he wouldn't to anyone else, that he preferred not to admit to himself. "Yes. I'd never say it to Hermione, of course, but... I'm terrified at the idea of the book. I'd rather walk through Diagon Alley stark naked than have her publish a book like that, knowing what she'd say... with her 'point of view,' with just enough truth to make the lies seem believable. I'm pretty scared of that."

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Harry Potter's Tragic Childhood

Twenty minutes later, Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny sat in the girls' bedroom, two each on two beds, facing each other. Hermione had just finished relaying the conversation to Neville and Ginny, who, like Harry and Hermione, were appalled.

Hermione concluded by saying, "I wish we could have told Ron and Pansy, too, on an open pendant channel, but they're doing their shifts, so we'll have to tell them about it later."

Pained, she looked at each of the others' faces before continuing. "Also, before we talk about what we're going to do, I want to apologize to all of you, especially Harry, for getting us into this mess." Turning to him, she continued, "You're the one who's going to suffer most for what I did, whichever way we choose. I'm very, very sorry... I never would have done this if I'd known what could happen."

Harry recognized that it was true that he was in a dire position because of what Hermione had done, but he felt strongly enough about Hermione that he wasn't about to kick her when she was down. "We all do things we wish later we hadn't done," he said. "Why should you be any different?"

She chuckled ruefully. "I thought I was. Well, anyway... I want to know what everyone thinks, but I want to know what you think first, Harry, because this affects you most of all."

He didn't have to think long. "To me, the question isn't whether we fight her, but how we fight her. First of all, giving in to this kind of thing is just really bad on principle. If I gave in, I would feel I was living someone else's life, not my own. Secondly, once we gave in, we'd be hers to control. She'd know she could get us to do anything. I don't think I can live my life like that. It just isn't that hard a decision."

"Neville?" she asked. "She did make that threat about you. If you were convicted—"

"It's not going to happen," replied Neville confidently. "She has no proof. Even if she admits she saw it as a beetle and heard us talk about it, that's not proof. Also, the Aurors would back me up, to them it would be as if I were an Auror. We should talk to Kingsley before this happens, but I'd rather take my chances, for the same reasons as Harry said. I don't want to be under someone's thumb, and whatever happens to Harry happens to all six of us. We're in it together."

"Ginny?"

Harry had no doubt about Ginny's response, and he was right. "Do you really need to ask? Of course, we fight."

Hermione looked at them proudly. "I have a feeling Ron and Pansy will say the same thing—but when we ask them, we get their opinion before telling them ours—so now we have to work out how we do it, what we do, what our options are in terms of fighting her."

"I was thinking about this while we were still out there talking, actually," said Harry. "I was thinking that one thing we might want to do, or might have to do, is reach out, see what people we know can do to help us. There are some things that she's threatened, like writing a book about me,

that we can't do anything about. But there are some things that we could do, or try to prevent from being done. Like talk to Kingsley about her threat to Neville; if they know about it beforehand, they might be better able to defend against it. Also, I could talk to Archibald and Hugo; Hugo could tell me the situation at the Prophet, whether there was any chance of getting them to refuse to print anything she writes. He wouldn't be able to do anything himself, but he could tell me who could. Archibald could help work out the question of how her punishment will work, and whether the Ministry could make the Prophet not print anything she writes, or even make the terms of her punishment that she can't write for any papers. We need to go on the offensive, we need to find out what the possibilities are."

"We also need to find out how we can protect Hermione from the legal consequences of what she did," added Neville. "If there are any."

Hermione shrugged. "At this point, I feel like saying I deserve whatever I get, but I know you guys feel differently, and I appreciate that. I understand the point, Harry, but in a way I'd rather take a couple of days before we start talking to people about this. Maybe there's something we're overlooking, something we can do to stop this before it starts. I'd like to at least think about it before we start telling people."

"What could we do?" asked Ginny. "Find something worse to blackmail her with?"

Surprised, Hermione glanced at Ginny to see whether she was joking. "No, even if that was an option, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't do it, in case it backfired like my other one has. No, I think I've learned my lesson. I feel like I'm in one of those Muggle children's dramas, you know the ones, Harry, that

try to teach children morals. 'And what did we learn this time? Well, we learned not to do things we know are immoral, because they always come back to haunt us.'" Hermione wasn't usually this cynical, but Harry could easily understand her attitude.

"Anyway," continued Hermione, getting back to Ginny's comment, "no, it's not that I have anything specific in mind, but just that it might be good to have some time to mull it over, think more carefully about what to do. Also, we have to be careful about what we do that quickly. I mean, suppose Harry contacted Hugo, and Hugo started making inquiries. Suppose by bad luck one of those got back to Skeeter. As it is, she's not going to do anything for five days, waiting for our answer, but in that case she would know our answer, and start doing things right away."

"We probably shouldn't wait too long, though," suggested Ginny. "We do want to get outside advice before she starts doing whatever it is she's going to do. Maybe we should start telling people in two days, on Friday."

"That's all right with me," agreed Hermione, checking to see if it was with the others as well. "But one thing, I have to be the one who does the telling. Neville, you and I will tell Kingsley, and Harry, I'll be with you to tell Dentus and Hugo. And I'll tell McGonagall myself."

"Do you really have to tell McGonagall?" asked Neville, obviously thinking that would be highly unpleasant for Hermione.

"She's going to find out about it anyway, Neville. I'd really rather she heard it from me than someone else. I respect her too much for that." Harry could understand that, knowing he'd have felt the same way about Dumbledore, if it had

been him. "Maybe we'll think of other things we can do, that might help us. Maybe she can help us in some way we don't know about. Obviously we don't want to tell too many people, since it could get around to people we don't want it to. But we should tell people we can trust."

"We have to tell my parents too," pointed out Ginny.

Hermione nodded reluctantly. "They know part of it already, of course, but... yes, I'm not looking forward to that, either."

"Is there any chance that she could get in trouble for trying to blackmail us?" wondered Neville.

"It's the same problem as with her trying to get me in trouble for what I did," said Hermione. "There's just no proof, nothing that would stand up at a trial. What she did is more obviously illegal, since she demanded money, but I doubt we could get her. That's something that Dentus could tell us, probably."

There was silence for a moment; it seemed that no one had anything more to say. Hermione spoke again. "Okay, we'll talk to Ron and Pansy when they get off shift. Obviously without you and Ginny, Harry, if you have a shift tonight. If you don't, it'll be the six of us.

"By the way, Harry, Ginny... I assume you did have a conversation about roughly what she said." They nodded. "You are right, Ginny. It was revenge. I didn't even realize it at the time, I just thought it was justice. But she was right, when she said I was a hurt little girl with more brains than common sense. That's what's so... really frustrating about all this, a lot of what she's said has been true. That, and the way I've treated Neville... it's just hard to face up to stuff like that about yourself, never mind in the middle of a situation

like this, and what Neville and I have already been through..."

It had been clear since the middle of her last sentence that tears were coming. Closest to her, Ginny put an arm around Hermione and let her cry on her shoulder. After Hermione finished, she thanked Ginny. "I bet I'm going to be doing a lot more of that before this is over," she said as she wiped away tears. Recovering, she added, "I almost wish I were still doing the shifts with the Aurors, it would give me something else to think about besides this."

"Well, if you really want something else to think about, there's something Harry was thinking about doing, that we wanted to ask you about," suggested Ginny.

Realizing what Ginny meant, Harry corrected her. "Something *we* were thinking about. I'm trying to get her used to the idea that my money is now our money."

"That may take a little time," she said, "you may have to be patient with me."

"I am nothing if not patient," he said. To the others' raised eyebrows, he added, "Well, not really. But I'll try. Anyway, we were thinking about buying some stuff, getting a computer and whatever else is necessary to use the internet here. Arthur would like it, but it would be for anyone to use who wanted to."

Hermione's face lit up. "Oh, that's a great idea, Harry! Arthur would just love it, and it would be convenient for me, too. What did you want to ask me about it?"

"Well, we got the idea from seeing it in Dudley's room," explained Harry. "He said that it's not that simple, that to get it set up you have to really know what you're doing. So as

you know, whenever there's something that requires a lot of research and will probably be boring and difficult, we think of you."

Neville and Ginny laughed, and Hermione reluctantly smiled. To Ginny, in a clearly sarcastic tone, she said, "It's when he says things like that, Ginny, that I can see why you can't keep your hands off him."

"Well, he doesn't say things like that to me," replied Ginny.

"I know you're just trying to make me laugh, Harry. I appreciate it. Sure, I'll look into it. My parents have it, of course, I'll ask them about it too. I assume you're hoping your part in this will be limited to providing the money?"

Mildly chagrined, he nodded anyway. "That would be ideal."

"Hmmm... I may make you do more than that, but we'll see. It's very sweet of you, both of you. And Ginny, you really should think of it as your money too, he's right. Neville and I don't have that issue, just because neither of us has much money."

"I was thinking," said Harry to Ginny, "that you and I should go on a shopping trip, get you used to the idea of using the money."

She smiled mischievously. "Better hope I don't get too used to it. But yes, I suppose you could talk me into it."

"Okay, I guess we're done, and I know you two need to go to sleep soon," said Hermione. "But there's another thing I want to talk to you about, and I'm really sorry, Neville, but..."

"That's okay, I understand," said Neville, standing up. "I know you have to talk about this with them from time to

time, you don't have to apologize to me every time. It's really all right." He left the room and closed the door.

Keeping her voice down, Hermione said, "About this thing about not telling people for a few days, it occurred to me that Snape could easily find out, Harry. He could just look at what happened today."

Harry shrugged. "If he sees it, he sees it. Not much that anyone can do about that. But I'll know if he's seen it, and if he does, I'll ask him to keep it under his hat until we start telling other people."

"Do you think he would?" wondered Hermione.

"I'm not sure, but I think so. I think he understands the idea that what he gets from my memories isn't something he's going to talk about with other people, or use the information without my permission. I think he would understand why it has to be that way. He's been very cooperative about the whole thing so far, like the timing and stuff like that."

"How's it going, anyway?" she asked.

"Fine," said Harry. "He didn't do it for almost a week, when the Apparation thing started, but now he's done it three days in a row. I guess he went too long without it, but he did say that that kind of thing would happen. Nothing really significant has happened, except that yesterday he practically had a fit when he found out I did Legilimency on Malfoy." Harry explained why Snape had reacted as he had.

Hermione frowned. "He's right, I should have thought of that too. I guess I was just enjoying what you did to Malfoy so much, I didn't think of the possible drawbacks. I can see why he was so upset."

"He was really trying to control himself; he knows that screaming at me isn't going to do any good, and will only make it that much harder for me to help him. It's funny, though... when he uses phrases like 'breathtakingly foolish' or 'stunning misjudgment' now, it actually bothers me more than it ever did when he insulted me before, because I know now he's not trying to be insulting, but trying to choose a phrase he thinks is accurate. And like you felt with Skeeter at times, the truth hurts. I did Legilimency on Malfoy partly because I wanted information, but mainly to hurt and humiliate him, because it would, and I could.

"Anyway, other than that, it's going all right with him. The hardest part is... you remember that Albus said that I would have to 'come from a place of love' all the time when I helped Snape. Especially since he's on his best behavior, that hasn't been as hard as I thought it might be. But it's really hard when I have other emotional reactions at the same time. Like, I felt really stupid and embarrassed at not thinking of the thing with Malfoy, and it's hard to feel that way and be calm and loving at the same time. That's where this is a lot harder for me than it was for Albus." He paused, thinking about whether there was anything else that needed to be discussed. "Well, we should get going, we still need our sleep in case we do a shift tonight."

They stood up. Hermione looked as though she were trying to keep her expression casual, but she was clearly still anguished at what the consequences of her actions might be to Harry. "Harry, I—"

He cut her off with a gesture, then stepped forward to hug her. "I'm so sorry," she said in a small voice as he held her.

"It's all right," he said, hoping it would be true. "Whatever happens, we'll deal with it. Don't blame yourself."

She had started to cry a little, but she chuckled at his last words. "Not much chance of that. Of course I blame myself, it's my fault this happened." She hugged him more tightly. "But it's nice of you to say that anyway."

He shook his head. "She didn't have to do what she did. She chose it. She's far more responsible than you. Don't forget that." He let her go, and she smiled her thanks. Ginny hugged Hermione as well, and they took Fawkes back to Hogwarts.

Thirty minutes later, in the bed in his quarters, Harry finished his Occlumency exercises. Ginny was on her side, facing him; he rolled over away from her to try to sleep. He felt her move closer to him, a hand on his side. He rolled back towards her.

"You're still up?" he asked, surprised.

"Just thinking."

"About the Skeeter thing?"

She nodded. "About what could happen." Concerned, she looked closely into his eyes. "Are you scared? About what could happen?"

He looked back, understanding that this was what a life partner was for, to talk about how he felt in ways that he wouldn't to anyone else, that he preferred not to admit to himself. "Yes. I'd never say it to Hermione, of course, but... I'm terrified at the idea of the book. I'd rather walk through Diagon Alley stark naked than have her publish a book like that, knowing what she'd say... with her 'point of view,' with just enough truth to make the lies seem believable. I'm pretty scared of that."

She gently touched his face. "I can see why, I would be too. It may be small comfort, but the people who know you and care about you wouldn't believe it, wouldn't even read the book."

"I know. And you're right, it is a comfort, but a small one." He looked into her eyes and saw her love for him, her compassion, the sure knowledge that there was nothing she could do to help him that she wouldn't do. He moved closer and wrapped his arms around her. "What is a comfort, a big comfort, is... we saw what she tried to do to Neville and Hermione, and how close it came to working. I know that there's nothing she can do to get us anywhere near that point. I know I'll always have you. You, your love, are the biggest comfort I could have."

She squeezed him hard. "I'm glad, I'm very glad. That's all I really want."

They lay silent in their embrace for a minute. He said, "You know, it's a terrible thing to think, but I almost wish the Apparation crisis would continue a while longer."

She moved her head from his shoulder so she could look at him. "No, you don't. You just wish we could sleep in the same bed. But I know what you mean, I do too. It's so nice." She sighed. "Well, it's something to look forward to when I graduate."

"Two years seems like a very long time right now."

"I know we should sleep, we have to sleep, there could be a shift. But part of me wants to just lie here awake for seven hours, enjoying this, because we may not get to do it again for a while."

"We'll be able to lie here," he corrected her. "Just not sleep."

"Guess so. Well, I'll roll over, then." She did, and Harry moved closer to her. He put his arms around her from behind, his body close to hers. She let out a small moan of contentment. "I love it when you do that."

"I do too," he said. "It's another big comfort."

"For me, too," she agreed. They stayed in the position until they fell asleep.

* * * * *

Nine and a half hours later, at a few minutes before midnight, Harry and Ginny walked into the standby area, looking for Kingsley. He walked in from the detection area, Ron and Pansy behind him. He asked them all to join him in a meeting room, and in a minute all five were sitting in one.

"Okay, it's been thirty-six hours since the last Apparation," said Kingsley. "We had excellent reason to believe that there would be no more, and events seem to be bearing that out. So, we're going to change how we deal with this, and part of the change is that you six won't be here all the time anymore. We will want you on call, in a sense, but we're going to consider that the period when we need to respond to each call with absolute maximum speed is over. We've won that battle.

"What we're going to do for the next... we're not sure how long, is that six people are going to be on ready status instead of ten, but the ones on standby will go too, just a few seconds later. We think that's an adequate safety precaution in case of an ambush. Another precaution is that after responding to a call, the senior Auror on the scene needs to send an 'all clear' signal, or you could call it the 'it's not an ambush' signal, within two seconds. If they don't, it becomes a full alert, and all hands are called in, including

you. We think that twelve Aurors can hold off however many of them there are for a few seconds, and we can arrive in force. Another aspect of this is that the ARA is being stiffened up; the penalty for a first offense is now two months in jail. After what just happened, we're assuming every call is a Death Eater attack.

"Now, as for how you fit into this... you six, or, five, until Neville is ready for action again, will be on call but not on-site. Your pendants will notify you if there's a call and the two-second 'all clear' isn't sent. When that happens, you should immediately Apparate to the detection room. Now, unfortunately, you're all at the Burrow, and can't Disapparate from there. So you have to get here in whatever way is fastest. If you're downstairs, head for the fireplace, and once you're in ours, Apparate to the detection room. If you're sleeping, Harry will call Fawkes, who will take the boys to the room, then go back for the girls. You get the idea. This way, we can use you without having to have you here all the time. If you're all right with it, that is. It seems like a reasonable medium-term solution. We know that once you're back at Hogwarts, only Harry can respond by Apparating, and we'll deal with that later. So, are you all okay with this?"

As expected, they all were, but Harry felt he had to mention something. "For now, it's only us four. I tested Hermione, and she's at 93. It's not confirmed that she can't do the spells, but it seems like a reasonable guess. I wouldn't want to test it."

"How did that happen?" asked Kingsley, puzzled.

"She's come under a pretty vicious emotional attack in the past few days, which you kind of know about already," said Harry. "My guess is that if you have a lot of very negative

emotions in the front of your mind, you can't use the energy of love. We can't know, of course, but I think it's a good guess."

Kingsley sighed. "You're the one best equipped to make it, Harry. But this could be a problem. Does this mean we're going to have to be checking everyone all the time? That could get messy. Could you drop below 100 just from having a bad fight with your spouse? We need to know how this works."

"As you know, Kingsley, this is very new," replied Harry. "I don't know. My guess is that it takes something really bad to knock you below 100. I mean, Ron got a fairly bad, but temporary, emotional blow about ten hours before he got his first 100, so I think it takes a lot."

Kingsley still looked uncomfortable. "If you could test Hermione every day or two, as she gets better, it would tell us a lot about how this works."

"I'm not sure that would be a good idea. She was upset just that I asked to test her, and much more when she didn't pass. This is all very... mental. Being tested often when they're not at 100 might give people a stronger sense of being under pressure, and make it harder for them to get there. I mean, given what he's been through, I'm not sure that Neville would be at 100 now, either, but I haven't tested him because I don't want him thinking about it. I only tested Hermione because I had to. I think they'll both get back to 100 as they recover naturally from what's happened."

Kingsley now seemed positively annoyed. "I should have known that there would be teething problems with something this good. Could you four humor me and let me

check you out?" He stood, cast the spell on himself, and one by one they all scored 100. "Well, that's something, anyway. Okay, that's about it for now. Any questions?"

No one had any. "Okay, just one more thing," said Kingsley. "Harry, we're going to take a bit of a break from your training, partly because we need to give our people some days off, too, and Neville wouldn't be up to it anyway. We might want to resume in a week or so. But while there's still some summer left, we were hoping you could start training us. We don't seem to be getting anywhere on the energy of love by ourselves. We wondered if you would start some sessions with some of us, in whatever way or group you think is best. It would be entirely up to you."

"Sure, I don't mind at all," Harry agreed. "I'll think about the details, and let you know in a day or two. It would have to be people who really want to do it, though."

Kingsley chuckled. "Harry, we all want to do this, really badly. We know what could be involved. I mean, for example, you're not going to meet anyone more... reserved than Dawlish. He doesn't speak unless he has to, but he'd spill his guts about anything you asked him to, to do this. There's no motivation problem."

"I guess I can believe that. Okay, I think it would be best to do it with the people I know best, for starters. That would be you, Cassandra, Tonks, Winston, and Jack. I'd also like Neville, so I could have help, and he knows you all too. I'll talk to him about it, and I'll let you know." Harry paused, thinking for a few seconds. "There's something else. I would want whoever does it to... how do I say this... you all can do the Killing Curse, like you did against that giant. I don't know this for a fact, but I really think it's the case that if you can use the Killing Curse, you can't use the energy of love."

It's just a feeling, a very strong feeling. Whoever does this has to not use the Killing Curse, I mean, make a decision not to use it. I really think that's necessary."

Again, Kingsley appeared unhappy. "I can see why you say that, but it could be a bit of a problem for some of us, especially me. It's very rare that we use it, but there could be times when it's necessary. I don't like the idea that somebody doesn't have that weapon at their disposal if they really needed it. And I say 'especially me' because I'm a senior Auror, and in many cases where it's necessary to kill, I would have to give the order. I might not be able to do what I need to do in a bad situation if I accepted that. I'm assuming that for your purposes, giving an order to kill isn't that different from actually doing it myself, right?"

"I would think so," Harry agreed. "I don't know what to say, Kingsley. I see your point, but I think this is important. I suppose we could try it where the others decide not to use the Killing Curse under any circumstances, and you decide not to use it or order it used unless you feel you absolutely have to, where lives are at stake if you don't. I don't know if that's going to work, but it seems worth a try. You have to decide that it's an absolute last resort."

Kingsley was silent for a moment. "I don't know if I can even do that, Harry. I mean, I can't say it was an absolute last resort against the giant, but it was the right thing to do. I mean tactically right, not morally right. I don't like the idea that I can't decide to do something like that; it's not compatible with being a leader in the field. Tell you what, I'll think about it, and we'll talk again when you decide on the details of how it's going to work."

Harry nodded, then looked as if he had just remembered something. "There's something I wanted to ask Ginny, but I

want to here, because you'd be involved too." Looking at Ginny, he said, "I want to do something, something I don't usually do, because this is over. I want us to go to dinner, in Diagon Alley, in some nice restaurant. Like the Golden Dragon, or something like that."

Surprise registered on everyone's faces. "Sure, I'd love to," said Ginny, recovering. "But you're right, it's not like you. What made you want to do that?"

"I'm not sure, it just seemed like a nice idea," he said. "It's like, I don't want to be cowed into never going out in public. Lots of people do stuff like that, and I never have. I think I'd like to. Also, I never had anyone like you to do it with."

"Count me in," she said, clearly very pleased.

"I assume I'm involved because of security considerations," said Kingsley.

Harry became serious. "Yes, and if it's any kind of problem at all, I won't do it. I'd rather not inconvenience you at all for something like this—"

Kingsley waved him off. "Don't be ridiculous, Harry, you helped end this thing. You deserve something like this, and there'll be no shortage of volunteers. What day and time were you thinking of?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe... Friday, seven-thirty?"

"Sure, no problem. In addition to the security, you should let me take care of the arrangements, and the reservations. I'd rather the reservations weren't in your name, because it could get out, and we don't want people knowing that sort of thing in advance. I'll talk to the restaurant manager, just tell him it's V.I.P.s, so when you go there, tell them that I

made your reservations. Of course, even if you showed up unannounced and with the restaurant full, because you're Harry Potter they'd probably conjure up a table and move everyone over a bit. But it's better to do it this way. Okay, consider it done. And have a nice time, you do deserve it.

"One last thing, all of you, and you can tell Hermione and Neville too... as long as you're on the kind of detached duty you'll all be on, you'll still be working for us, so to speak. So you should feel free to wear those robes whenever you want to, at home or in public." Harry saw a proud smile break out over Ron's face, as he knew it would; Ron had been very excited to put on Aurors' robes. "In fact, it's kind of better if you do, in case you get called. Okay, that's it. Our thanks to all of you, and tell Hermione and Neville, too. Now, relax and take care of yourselves."

They thanked Kingsley, got up, and headed to the fireplace. "Wow, wearing Aurors' robes in public!" enthused Ron as they walked. "Pansy, we have to go into Diagon Alley tomorrow, walk around, what do you say?"

She laughed at his enthusiasm. "You just want to be seen."

"You bet," he agreed. "Especially by Fred and George, they'll have a heart attack... and knowing them, they'll do it at the same time. I also want to celebrate Malfoy being in custody. Before I wouldn't have wanted to do this, but you're a lot safer now, so I don't mind."

"Sounds great to me," she agreed. "And Harry, that'll be interesting, dinner at the Golden Dragon. That's the fanciest restaurant in Diagon Alley. You should have a good time."

His arm around Ginny as they walked, Harry said, "I don't know if this is part of what made me think of that, but it occurred to me that I've never been to a nice restaurant in

my entire life. The Dursleys never took me, of course, and as a wizard there was never any reason to." He smiled at Ginny. "Now there is."

When they returned to the Burrow, it was twenty minutes after midnight, but Neville and Hermione were still up, sitting on the living room sofa. As Harry made his way through the fireplace behind the other three, he heard Neville comment, "So, I guess this means it's over, huh?"

Harry realized Neville was referring to he and Ginny not starting a shift. "Yes, it is." He went on to describe the Aurors' plans for them for the future, and the rest of the conversation as Ron and Pansy joined Hermione and Neville on the sofa, while he and Ginny took chairs. As he finished, he noticed the Pensieve on the floor near the sofa, and raised his eyebrows inquiringly at Hermione.

"I just couldn't bring myself to repeat that conversation again, or even hear it repeated," she explained, answering his unasked question. "But Ron and Pansy need to hear it, of course. I already put my memory in there, they can take a look at it."

Ron and Pansy were obviously less than enthusiastic at the prospect. "For pure entertainment value, I'd rather watch Harry catch Malfoy a few more times," joked Pansy. "But yes, I suppose we should." She put the Pensieve on the coffee table, and she and Ron put their fingers in.

Responding to Harry's account of the conversation with Kingsley, Hermione said, "When Kingsley talked about us being on call, he didn't mean Neville or me, I suppose?"

"No," agreed Harry, looking first at Neville, then at Hermione. "I think you'll be back when Kingsley and Cassandra think it's okay, and you," turning to Hermione,

"when you're back at 100. You know, I'm really sorry I had to--"

She cut him off. "I'm the one who's sorry." With a wry smile, she added, "It's becoming my new mantra. But you were right, you did have to, and it was very clever of you to think of doing it. If I had gone out on a call, had to try to use the spell and failed... it would have been extremely bad. I shouldn't have been snippy with you."

Harry shook his head. "I think we'd forgive you much more than that, right now."

"Obviously you do, considering what we're looking at, because of me."

"It's not only you," he protested. "She was right, I knew and I didn't say--"

"Oh, please, Harry, I thought you knew better than to take anything she said seriously," scoffed Hermione. "You had just been through this traumatic experience, and were facing another summer with the Dursleys, and you were going to think about whether I had done the right thing or not? She knows the circumstances you were in, and she only said that to try to justify taking from you what she can't take from me. I would never have listened to you if you'd tried to talk me out of it. I knew what was best, after all."

Much as he wanted to, Harry couldn't argue with what she had said. He changed the subject, and they chatted until Ron and Pansy finished watching the memory in the Pensieve. "No, Pansy's right, definitely not high-quality entertainment," commented Ron. "But your bit was pretty good, Neville. Nice show of support." Neville smiled in mild embarrassment.

"Of course the four of you have already talked about this," said Pansy. "I think we don't really need to ask. Being her 'friend' is totally out of the question, right?"

Not answering Pansy's question, Hermione turned to Ron. "I assume you feel the same way?"

Ron nodded. "It really comes down to you, of course," he said, looking at Harry. "You're in it much deeper than the rest of us. And I saw your face when she mentioned the book, and I'd feel the same way. But I know you, there's just no way you would do this. Obviously, we're totally with you."

Hermione thanked them, and told them about the rest of the conversation she and the others had had earlier. They talked for another hour, about the Skeeter situation first, then other things as the conversation branched out. Finally at one-thirty, Ron and Pansy decided to go to bed, and Neville went through the fireplace back to his Auror quarters. Telling Pansy she would be up in a minute, Hermione lingered until the others were gone.

Keeping her voice down even though they were alone, Hermione asked Harry, "What happened with Snape? Did he have a session tonight?"

"Yeah, fourth day in a row," said Harry. "And no, fortunately, he didn't look at anything to do with the Skeeter thing. He went back to what he'd been doing before, going through my life year by year. He spent today's session at the end of our fourth year."

She raised her eyebrows. "That's good, but I'm a little surprised he didn't think this is worth keeping an eye on."

"Well, the other thing is what he usually does," pointed out Harry. "I think he only started looking at daily events

because of the Apparation crisis and how it involved the Death Eaters. Now that that's over, he must not feel the need. He would consider the Skeeter thing just part of our personal lives, something he wouldn't have that much interest in."

"Well, thank goodness for small favors, anyway," said Hermione. "Okay, I'm going to bed too. Good night."

Harry and Ginny were alone on the sofa. "I guess we have to get back to our usual sleep schedule now," she said.

"Somehow I think if we go up to our beds, we're not going to get much sleep."

"No, I guess we're better off just staying awake through the night, then going to sleep early tomorrow night," he agreed. Trying to keep a straight face, he continued, "It's about four and a half hours until people start waking up here. Now, what are we going to do with all that time?"

"You're just trying to torment me," she grinned. "What you really mean is, would there be anything wrong with taking Fawkes back to your quarters."

Now grinning along with her, he said, "Yes, that must be what I meant. But I wouldn't think so; Molly just wanted to be able to know where we were. We could just leave a note." She agreed, and they did.

Harry heard the footsteps moving down the stairs, and looked up at the living room clock. It was a quarter after six, which Harry guessed was the usual time Molly got up. He then heard the padding of slippers on the floor as she came into the living room. He and Ginny were on the sofa, his arm around her, their feet up on the coffee table, reading *From Albus, To Harry* together.

"Good morning, dears. Oh, it's so nice that you're reading that together," said Molly as she peered over their shoulders. "I've had a few peeks at it some days when I've been cleaning, it's really wonderful. Have you been reading it all night?"

"Well, not *a//* night," said Ginny, looking up at her mother with amusement.

Molly feigned exasperation. "Do you see that, Harry? My daughter is taunting me. Give them an inch... Thank goodness you don't do that, you're much too nice to."

"No, he's much too embarrassed to," Ginny corrected her mother. Harry smiled but said nothing, hoping to avoid becoming involved in the conversation at all.

"I think it's cute that you're embarrassed about it," said Molly.

Speaking before he thought, Harry responded, "Well, I'm embarrassed about *talking* about it, but not..." He trailed off as he realized what he was about to say, and went back to reading the book as Molly and Ginny laughed.

"It's probably a good idea to think about where a sentence will end before you start it," Ginny suggested, then leaned over to kiss him. Molly chatted with them about the previous day's events, expressing her pleasure that the Apparation crisis was over, and that they planned to go to the Golden Dragon.

"Arthur and I went there once, for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, it was very nice. I really wouldn't want to do that sort of thing so often, but it was a nice change." Molly spent a few minutes telling them about the experience, then headed off to the kitchen to start breakfast. Harry and Ginny

continued reading until Pansy and Hermione came down a half hour later; they chatted with them about the contents of Dumbledore's book until breakfast was ready. Harry went upstairs to put the book away and see if Ron wanted to come down for breakfast.

"Well?" asked Pansy as Harry came back into the kitchen and sat down at the table. Arthur walked into the kitchen and sat down as well.

"He seems to be thinking about it," said Harry. "He said something, but I couldn't quite make it out. I think it might have been 'go away.'"

"Sounds like a good guess," said Pansy.

"Well, that could be your future, Pansy," said Ginny, deadpan.

"Come on, Ginny, it's way too soon to think about that. I mean, we just got together a few weeks ago," protested Pansy, though she clearly knew she was being teased. "Give us some time. It's a year before we could think about doing anything anyway."

"Well, you are both of age," pointed out Ginny, persisting. "You could have the Joining of Hands done." Now Harry chuckled, imagining what Ron's reaction would be if he heard that. Pansy gave Ginny a 'very funny' smile.

"You know, I hear people talking about that at work once in a while, since you two had it done," said Arthur conversationally. "Before that, I'd hardly ever heard it mentioned. People still think it's a bit strange, because it's so uncommon. And some of the younger men, you know how they are about commitment, they were joking that it should be called the 'Shackling of Wrists.' A few have asked me why

in the world I would let my fifteen-year-old daughter have it done."

"Did you tell them it was because your forty-nine-year-old wife thought it was a good idea?" asked Molly.

"No, but that would have been a good answer too," chuckled Arthur. "No, I just said, 'Do you think we would have allowed it if it had been anyone but him?'"

Everyone at the table but Harry laughed. "Good answer," said Ginny, smiling at Harry, who focused on trying not to be embarrassed.

"None of the women asked me that, though," said Arthur. "Especially the ones with children, they know that we all want to see our children married well. One of them said to me, 'Six sons and one daughter, but you really hit the jackpot with her!'"

There was more laughter as Ginny said, "Dad, I think Harry's starting to wonder whether you're trying to embarrass him, or if it's purely by accident."

"I'm just saying what people said, so it's their fault, not mine," said Arthur innocently.

"I'm just wondering, Arthur," said Hermione, "was there anybody who thought you did the wrong thing? I mean, it occurred to me, some people who don't know Harry and Ginny might think, she was fifteen and a half, it's too young to let her make that kind of important life decision. She can always do it when she's seventeen, there's no hurry. Did anybody say that?"

Arthur thought. "Not in just those words, but something like that, yes. And a key phrase there is 'people who don't know

Harry and Ginny.' I mean, I don't get the impression that you or the others thought that. It's not an unreasonable argument, of course. Or, you could say, it's a good argument on paper, but in real life... we knew perfectly well Ginny wasn't going to feel any differently when she was seventeen. The only reason not to do it was one that just made sense in theory. Looking at them both, talking to them, you just knew. So you could say, the lesson here is to not judge situations you don't really know."

Despite the potential for being further embarrassed, Harry was curious enough to ask a question. "Were you kidding, then, about the 'if it was anybody but me' thing? It could have been someone else she felt this way about, after all." Ginny looked at him sharply, an incredulous expression on her face. "Well, theoretically," Harry added hastily.

Arthur grinned at their interaction. "No, I wasn't kidding, Harry. And the point, I hope you know, isn't that you're 'Harry Potter' as such, just that it was you. We knew you well, we had already sort of adopted you, we knew what kind of person you are. It's not impossible that she could have fallen for some other boy, theoretically," he added, forestalling Ginny's objection, "who was a really good person, but we wouldn't have approved the Joining of Hands because we wouldn't have known them, not like we know you. But it has nothing to do with anything the public associates with Harry Potter."

"Another factor, I suspect," added Molly, "is that we fell in love in sixth year at Hogwarts, when we were sixteen; I was just a half a year older when I fell in love with Arthur than Ginny was with Harry. And Arthur and I were sure we would end up together, so it's hard for us to subscribe to the 'they're too young to know what they're doing' school of thought."

As she spoke, an owl flew in with a copy of the Daily Prophet, which fell in front of Hermione. Ron walked down the stairs, looking half-awake. "Morning, Ron," said Ginny. "Did you sleep in those?"

Ron glanced down at his Aurors' robes as he took a seat. "No, it's a bit warm for that. But I get your point, so I will say that yes, I plan to wear them at every available opportunity until the term starts. So if you'd like to make fun of me for that, go right ahead."

"Not quite so much fun now," said Ginny resignedly.

"Glad to hear it," replied Ron.

For the next two minutes everyone focused on eating; the only noise was the clinking of silverware and the rustling of Hermione's newspaper. Finally, Hermione sighed and said, "Well, Skeeter is now officially active. Front page of today's Prophet: 'Harry Potter's Tragic Childhood.'"

"They let her write?" asked Ron disbelievingly, as Harry winced. "While she's up on charges of being an unregistered Animagus?"

"Apparently so," confirmed Hermione. "I just read the article. It's pure Skeeter. Most of it's true, but she gives it a flourish, you could say, and makes it seem worse than it is. Which is quite a feat, in Harry's case, because his childhood was pretty bad. The article is favorable to you, Harry; you're the tragic, unwanted orphan, cruelly treated by uncaring, selfish Muggles."

"Isn't that pretty much the truth, though?" pointed out Ron.

"Yes," she agreed, "but it's just the way she says things. For example, Harry, you've said they never hit you. She doesn't

say they did, but she implies that with all this other stuff, they must have. It mentions the cupboard under the stairs and Dudley's second bedroom, and how he bullied you, but at the end says how you nobly rose above such belittlements and are now nice to Dudley, even if you can't quite find it in your heart to forgive your aunt and uncle. It heavily emphasizes the Dursleys-are-anti-wizard angle. She makes Dudley look kind of bad, but redeemed, and your aunt and uncle are the true villains of the piece. Listen to this: 'All evidence sadly points to the conclusion that if the true story of how Harry was treated were presented as fiction, it would be considered 'over-the-top' and scarcely believable, and his aunt and uncle, two-dimensional caricatures with no visible redeeming qualities.' And of course, in true Skeeter fashion... you've said more than once that you think they were that way because of what happened to your mother, that her sister was scared of wizards because of that. No mention of that anywhere."

"Well, it's a good thing they don't get the Prophet," said Molly.

"Oh, they'll get this," said Hermione with certainty. "Skeeter will have had it sent to them. Harry may look good in this, but she didn't do it to be nice to him."

"Could I see it?" asked Harry.

"You're going to read it?" asked Hermione in surprise as she handed it to him. "I thought you wouldn't want to."

"I don't, really, but I'm sure I'm going to be hearing about it, so I'd better read it so I won't be surprised to hear what's in it," grumbled Harry. He wondered how many times in the future he would be reading unpleasant articles about himself for the same reason.

The article was indeed relentlessly negative toward Vernon and Petunia, casting them in a worse light than even Harry felt they deserved. As he read, Harry realized the article's own special meaning as a message from her to him: it was part promise, it made him look good, meant to encourage him to be her 'friend,' but it was also part warning, as she understood that he had avoided discussing his relatives publicly and would not have wanted the article to be written. Harry felt the message was that if he became her enemy, the articles would get a lot worse. He felt a wave of despair as he remembered the threatened book, which would become a reality if he rejected her proposal, which he knew he would do. He glanced to his right and saw an extremely glum look on Hermione's face; he wondered if she had been keeping an eye on him as he read the article, and felt even worse about the difficulty he was in.

Finishing, he handed the paper to Ginny, saying, "Did you see the thing at the end, that little footnote that acknowledges that she's an unregistered Animagus, but swears she didn't use that ability for this article? That's the biggest lie here. I mean, there are things I said on Tuesday at Privet Drive in here, and she was definitely a beetle there."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I noticed. I have to imagine it's for the sake of form, on the part of the Prophet. They know it's a lie, but they pretend they believe her, so they're covered, legally speaking. By the way, where did she get the quotes from Dudley?"

"That was from the day I caught Malfoy, just before I found her hiding in my robes," said Harry. "Pansy had asked him why his parents treated me like they did. I'm not surprised she used it, it fits with her story really well."

"It makes them look worse than almost anything else in the article, really," agreed Hermione. "He basically admits that they raised him to treat you badly. Your aunt and uncle are going to be furious, I'd imagine. What are you going to do about that?"

Harry shrugged. "I know this doesn't sound nice, but it is the first thought that pops into my head, and it's the truth: I really don't care. This article may not be exactly the truth, but it's close enough that I don't feel bad about it. They'll read this and think it's all lies, maybe lies I've told. They'll never recognize themselves in the article, and I don't care if they do. I'm just lucky I wasn't living there when this happened, I don't have to hear their reaction."

"How can they not recognize themselves, if what the article says is mostly true?" wondered Ron.

"When you get a little older, Ron," said Arthur, adopting a humorous tone that suggested he was older than he was, "you'll discover that people have all kinds of ways to avoid dealing with unpleasant facts about themselves—"

"Like deciding they're right all the time," put in Hermione gloomily.

There was silence for a few seconds, as the others were taken aback by Hermione's uncharacteristic attitude. Then Pansy looked at Hermione sympathetically. "You're starting to remind me of how I was last year, when every other word out of my mouth was something negative about myself. I seem to recall you and Harry telling me to go easier on myself, not to beat myself up all the time."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, but at least no one was paying for your mistakes any more. Harry's paying for mine, and he may for quite some time."

"How do you mean, Hermione?" asked Molly. "Wouldn't she be writing about Harry like this anyway, and wouldn't she have been doing it all along if you hadn't put a stop to it?"

"No, she wouldn't have the kind of information she does, if not for what I had done." Hermione took a deep breath, then explained to Molly and Arthur what Skeeter had threatened. "So, obviously, we're not going to do what she wants," concluded Hermione. "But unless we can do something to stop her, Harry's in for a pretty bad time."

Molly was clearly horrified, and even Arthur reacted strongly. "That evil, awful, despicable woman..." exclaimed Molly.

"But it's my fault, if I hadn't done what I did--"

Molly pointed a finger at Hermione. "You didn't make her become an unregistered Animagus and use her ability like that, Hermione. Don't you blame yourself for that. You're responsible for what you did, and she's responsible for what she's done."

Arthur nodded. "She's right, of course. Suppose you had turned her in, like you now say you should have done. That would be very reasonable, nobody would argue with that. Nobody, including you, would now be suggesting you did anything wrong. But couldn't she have just gone off and done the same thing anyway? Said, 'I can't be a reporter anymore, so I'm going to get revenge on the one who found me out by making her life and that of her friends miserable?' And would you be responsible for that? Of course not. So you're not responsible for this, either.

"You see, Hermione--and this gets back to what I was starting to say a minute ago, about how people avoid reality--we all create for ourselves what you could call our own narrative, our own story. It's what we tell ourselves about ourselves.

For some people it's pretty close to the 'objective truth,' if there is such a thing, and for some, like Harry's aunt and uncle, it's probably fairly far away. But they couldn't live with themselves if they had to see themselves in terms of what they really did to Harry, so they tell themselves something else."

"I overheard them once," put in Harry. "They tell themselves that they were 'strict' with me."

"Yes, that's a good example," agreed Arthur. "It's all right to be strict, so they can tell themselves that and be okay with that. Though I wonder how they justify the cupboard-under-the-stairs thing... but I digress. If we more or less accept the idea that we should behave morally, but we don't, then we build a narrative that justifies our actions. Ironically, the narrative for someone like Voldemort would be very close to the objective truth, because he has no need to put what he does in any kind of moral context, or justify it to himself. To him, power is its own justification. As for Skeeter, she probably has a fairly twisted narrative by now. Probably one element of it is the idea that it's all right to be an unregistered Animagus. She might think, everyone breaks the law a little, so why not me, or, it's my body, I should be able to do what I want with it without having to tell the government."

"Another," added Pansy, "would be the idea that it's all right to write articles the way she does, that leave people with a wrong impression. She said it to them yesterday, with all these justifications. Articles would be boring, intelligent people understand, everybody does it."

"Another good example," said Arthur. "So if you look at it like she does—that it's perfectly reasonable to be an unregistered Animagus, to use that ability to get stories, to write those

stories in whatever biased way makes them most interesting—then what Hermione did looks pretty bad. No doubt she feels totally victimized by Hermione, and so justifies just about anything she's done, or will do. Now, Hermione, part of my point is that you don't have to accept that. In your haste to blame yourself for what Harry may suffer, you overlook the fact that she's responsible for her own actions. All you have to ask yourself is whether what you did was morally wrong. I'm not so sure it was. You only made her stop writing for a while; exposure probably would have done it permanently. Once the charges against her start to go through the system, I don't think she'll be writing for the Prophet anymore. You gave her more of a break than you had to."

Hermione was silent, with an expression that suggested that however rationally correct Arthur's points were, it couldn't make her feel better. Harry remembered how he had felt when Sirius died, when the students died at Hogsmeade, and found that he could identify all too easily with how Hermione felt. He found that despite what lay ahead for him, he felt worse for her than he did for himself.

Neville came over at nine-thirty, and at ten Ron and Pansy left for Diagon Alley, both in their Aurors' robes. Harry sat in the living room talking to Ginny, Neville, and Hermione. At one point he went upstairs for a few minutes, and when he came back down, he was surprised to see Hugo Brantell standing with the others.

"Hugo!" he said, as they shook hands. "It's good to see you. What are you doing here?"

"I mainly came to talk to Neville and Hermione, for the article on what happened to them the other day," Hugo

replied. "But it seems like you guys are already onto another crisis. You certainly have interesting lives."

"We live in 'interesting times,'" muttered Hermione.

Hugo noticed Harry's puzzled expression. "Hermione's referring to a well-known old Chinese saying, which I assume she knows because she reads a lot," he said, giving her a quick grin. "If you wish someone ill, you say, 'may you live in interesting times.' The idea is that most things that make a time period interesting are bad things. It's like a variation on 'no news is good news.' I mean, don't I usually show up after something bad has happened?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way," said Harry. "It does seem that we live in an extremely interesting time. But you said 'another' crisis. Did they tell you about it already? I was only upstairs for a few minutes."

"You keep forgetting about my special powers, Harry. No, they haven't said anything, but their mood, combined with my understanding of general circumstances and, if I may be so immodest, above-average analytical skills, tells me quite a lot about the situation. Why don't I tell you what I've gathered, and you can tell me the rest if you want?" Intrigued, Harry and the others nodded.

"Okay... first, now of course I know what Hermione did with Skeeter: made her stop writing on pain of it being revealed that she was an Animagus. After Fudge was killed and Skeeter was exposed, Hermione lost her hold on Skeeter, and it's not a leap to imagine that Skeeter's spoiling for revenge. And since you six are a unit, she'll take it out on all of you, Harry being the fattest target. I'm not sure exactly how today's article fits into that, but I'm sure it does somehow; maybe she wants to start off being nice to you

before she rips into you. Also, given the nature of the quotes in the article, and that I know you would never give her quotes, she's been following you around as a beetle. Finally, given the palpable sense of crisis here, I gather that she's made some threats, or is trying to blackmail you in some way. How's that?"

The four teenagers exchanged impressed looks. "Amazing, as usual," said Hermione. "She visited us yesterday, and made her demands. I was going to show you in the Pensieve, but now it looks like there's no point. We were actually going to call you anyway, Hugo, to ask for your advice and help. We're in a pretty bad situation."

He nodded. "Sure, I'll do what I can. But I'd still like to see what happened in the Pensieve anyway. It's not the same as being in person, but I can still pick up stuff that most people wouldn't. I might be able to get useful information."

Harry realized with a start that a reference to Snape would be included in that. "Hermione, would you come with me for a second? Excuse us, Hugo." He pulled Hermione into the kitchen. "She mentions the thing with Snape!" he whispered. "You can't show it to him!"

"Relax, Harry, I did think of that. I showed Ron and Pansy, remember? I edited out that part, and I will for Hugo too."

He nodded, calming down. "Sorry, I should have known." They went back into the living room. "Sorry, Hugo, it's just that there was something in there that I can't tell you, as much for personal as for operational reasons."

"It's all right, Harry," Hugo said humorously. "I don't expect to know every secret from every person I deal with."

"Bet you know most of them, though," replied Harry as Hermione put her memory into the Pensieve.

Hugo grinned. "I try to be extremely discreet." He entered the Pensieve. When he returned, he had an impressed look. "I must say, I didn't think she'd go quite that far."

"Like I said, it's pretty bad," said Hermione glumly.

"Yes, it is," agreed Hugo. "Now, my analysis. First of all, the bit at the end, where she threatened to reveal operational information... it was easy to tell that that's an empty threat, she's not going to do it if you refuse. Sorry, when you refuse. She knows the Prophet would never let her do it, and it would be too great a risk to her anyway. As for the book, and the other things she threatened you with, obviously she is very serious about that. The fact is, she hopes you'll say no. She wants the money and the access to Harry, but viscerally, she wants to make Hermione suffer even more, and she knows that making Harry suffer is an excellent way to do that. She thinks you'll say no, but she isn't sure; she knows perfectly well how the book will affect Harry, and thinks there's at least a chance he'll cave. If he did cave, she would intend to hold up her part of the bargain—there would be no book—but she would expect to own you, in a sense, that you'd be able to refuse her no request." He shook his head in wonder. "I've seen a few disturbed people, and she's definitely up there with them. One thing that might help you to understand why she's like this is that before Hermione clipped her wings, she was the star of the magical journalism world. She had access at the highest levels, friends, her articles were popular—she is right when she says that having a 'point of view' makes articles more interesting to most people. She had disdain for those of us who practiced balanced, 'boring' journalism. So, she had farther to fall when she did, and the fall hurt more. She had a big ego, and

it took a huge pounding. When she said what she did about friends and family, I could tell that that hurt her most, the loss of prestige. That drove her to this sort of nasty revenge as much as anything else."

Listening to Hugo, Harry felt grateful that they would have his help. "So, now, the question is, what can we do? What should we do?"

"Well, Harry, obviously the facts of what you've done in the past year give you influence, and there would be high-level people in the magical world, maybe in the Ministry but also outside it, who would help you if you asked. The trick is to know who to ask, and to make sure the help is unconditional. You don't want to find yourself in a position in the future where someone is under the impression that you owe them a favor, any favor they choose to ask. You also, obviously, can't ask for anything illegal or unethical, as it gets you right into the same boat with a different person.

"Now, as to what I can do personally... what I would recommend is that you go on the offensive, and I can help you do that. I could write an article, an article that would bring all this out in the open. That she's followed you, that she's gotten information in highly unethical ways, that she blackmailed you for money and access. It is true that this would expose you to her following through on her threats, but since you were going to refuse her demands, she was going to do that anyway. This would put her on the defensive and make her look very bad, which of course she deserves. This wouldn't stop her from writing the book; as she said, nothing can stop that. But what it would accomplish is, first of all, legal consequences aside, she would never write for the Prophet again. I'm certain of that. Secondly, if she did find someone to print what she wrote, or just wrote the book, she would be highly discredited. Most

people wouldn't even believe the things she said about you that were true. I think that as far as the book goes, that's as good a result as you could hope for.

"There would be one cost to doing this. Hermione, you would have to give an interview, and come clean about what you did two years ago, give all the details." Harry gave a start, which Hugo noticed. "I know, Harry, but this is going to happen anyway. Skeeter is going to give her account of what Hermione did as soon as she knows you're refusing her demands. At least this way, your version is the one that people hear first. We can get a legal opinion before I do this. I know she puts herself in very minor legal jeopardy by admitting it as opposed to simply being accused, but she'd have to admit it anyway unless she wanted to publicly lie about it, which I can tell she doesn't want to do. I'm sure, though, that nothing would happen to her. The other positive thing about this is that it makes Skeeter look even worse, that she's trying to take it out of Harry's skin for what Hermione did. Harry will come off looking extremely sympathetic. Hermione won't look so good, but probably no worse than misguided. The article would extensively re-quote the things that upset you, Hermione, and you would explain why you felt victimized enough to do what you did. A lot of people would understand, and also admire the fact that you were clever enough to figure her out and catch her.

"Very strictly speaking, what I'm suggesting would be unethical on my part, as my motive in writing an article is supposed to be only to inform people, not accomplish some goal." With a small grin, he added, "My article would have a 'point of view.' But it would still be far less unethical than any article she's ever written, and you guys are in a position you don't deserve to be in. Also, my article would be the truth; I can live with it very easily. So, if you'd like to take some time to think about it—"

Hermione cut him off. "No, we don't need to. We'll do it."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "Whatever happened to deciding things as a group?"

"Not this one." She stepped up to him, her gaze earnest and determined, her voice full of emotion. "Harry, this is perfect. The best thing about it is that it takes the heat off you and puts it on me, where it belongs. And like he said, what I did was going to be exposed anyway. This is best for me, as well as you. But you have to know that I would expose myself to this anyway. I should be the one to take the consequences, if there are any. It's killed me that first Neville, then you, would suffer for what I did. Please don't argue with me. You would do this, in my position. It's the right thing to do."

Harry wanted to find arguments to make, but there were none; he knew she was right. He felt his chest tighten; he looked down, then at her, and nodded, resigned. She looked at him appreciatively, also saying nothing.

She turned to Hugo. "Thank you, Hugo. I appreciate this, more than I can say. Well, you can probably tell anyway even if I can't say. When would it be printed?"

"The Sunday Prophet is perfect. Her deadline is Monday, so that gives you maximum time to do whatever else you're going to do, and it also has the largest readership, which, while not ideal for you personally, Hermione—"

"I understand," she interrupted, clearly hoping to forestall another objection from Harry. "That sounds good. When should we do it?"

"Probably Saturday. Better to do it as late as possible in case anything changes. For now, of course, we should do the one I came for. That is, Neville, if you're up to it. I waited a few

days because I know this was terrible for you, and if you'd like more time, that's fine."

"No, now is okay," agreed Neville. "Just as well to get it over with now. I'm sorry, I don't mean--well, never mind, you know what I mean. You probably did before I said anything."

"Yes, but I find it makes people more comfortable if I let them say things instead of telling them what they were going to say. It's not me personally, it's talking about what happened. I totally understand."

As Hugo finished his sentence, there was a small explosion in the fireplace. To the shock of Harry and his friends, Dudley walked out.

Harry gaped in disbelief. "D-Dudley?" he managed to get out. Dudley grinned at Harry's astonishment.

After a few seconds of silence, Hugo stepped forward. "Hi, Dudley. I'm Hugo Brantell, a journalist. I wrote the articles about Harry over the past year, but not the one today, as I'm sure you know."

"Nice to meet you," replied Dudley. "So, you're the one that can read people's minds?"

Hugo chuckled. "Not quite--"

"Seems that way sometimes," Neville put in humorously.

"So, what am I thinking?" asked Dudley, obviously very interested.

"Well, as I was saying, it's not exactly mind-reading," said Hugo. "It's that I can tell a person's mood, and whether or not they're being truthful. Would you like me to tell you

what your mood is?" Dudley nodded eagerly. "Well," continued Hugo, with the air of one who had done the same thing for people's entertainment many times, "your mood is mainly one of excitement at the moment. Not only excitement for doing something you're not supposed to—your mother will go berserk if she finds out you've done this—but also for just coming over here, to this other world you've heard about but never seen. You've wanted to do this for some time, but haven't had a good enough reason until now, to talk to Harry about the article this morning. And as I mention the article, I see that you're definitely not a big fan of Rita Skeeter, but at least you understand that Harry had nothing to do with it. So, how was that?"

Now Dudley was gaping. "Wow, amazing," he enthused. "Pretty cool ability, for a reporter. You don't even have to ask people questions, do you?"

"No, I do, they just don't have to answer them," joked Hugo. "But I let them do it anyway, just to be polite." As he spoke, Crookshanks came bounding down the stairs.

"Crookshanks!" said Hermione happily. "What are you—oh, I see, you're checking him out. So, what do you think?" After regarding Dudley in what Harry felt was a slightly haughty manner for a few seconds, Crookshanks rubbed his face against Dudley's shin, then turned and went out through the front door. "Must be going to chase the gnomes, he does love it here. Congratulations, Dudley, you passed inspection." To Dudley's quizzical expression, she explained, "You see, Crookshanks is part Kneazle, which is kind of a catlike magical creature. That's why he doesn't look exactly like a normal cat. Kneazles are well known for being able to detect untrustworthy people."

"Seems like kind of a strange talent," mused Dudley. Harry had never thought of it that way, but felt that Dudley was right.

Hugo turned to Neville. "Neville, Hermione, where would you like to do it?"

"The kitchen, I guess," suggested Hermione.

"Okay. Oh, and Harry, I'd like a few words with you, too, about rescuing them. And from Fawkes, too, if he can spare the time," Hugo joked.

"He should get all the credit, all I did was slow him down," Harry replied. "Sure, I'll be around." Hugo, Neville, and Hermione walked to the kitchen, leaving Harry, Ginny, and Dudley alone.

"Fawkes is the phoenix, right?" asked Dudley.

He remembers a lot from those articles, thought Harry. "Yes, he-oh, there he is," said Harry as Fawkes appeared and perched on Harry's shoulder. Dudley's eyes went wide. He made a silent request to pet Fawkes; Harry nodded, and Dudley did.

"Wow, really soft. So, what does he do?"

"Saves my life, mostly," Harry half-joked. "It's kind of hard to explain. He can travel from anywhere to anywhere in a blink, and can carry me, so that's often very helpful. The other thing phoenixes are well known for is their calming qualities. Just being around him makes me calmer. And of course their song, they're pretty famous for that." As Harry finished the sentence, Fawkes started singing, stopping after about twenty seconds. Dudley was clearly enraptured.

"Wow... I could listen to that for hours," he said. Harry noticed that it was the third time Dudley had said 'wow' in the past few minutes.

"I have, before," said Harry. "He doesn't do it that often, though, mainly when I particularly need it. Which is often enough, considering how my life is." He and Ginny sat down on the sofa, and he motioned Dudley to a chair. "Well, I don't need to ask, or to be Hugo, to know that your mother had a fit this morning. Hell, she probably had one just from the paper arriving, never mind the article."

"Yeah, she was surprised to get a whole paper, not just a clipping. Why did we get one, anyway?"

"Skeeter clearly had it sent to you. This is part of her campaign of harassment against me. She's written nasty things about me before; she only made me look good in this article so your parents would look worse by comparison, and blame me for it. She wanted Petunia to assume I cooperated with it, to make her and Vernon look bad."

Dudley nodded. "Worked like a charm, then. That's exactly what happened."

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, but it's like shooting fish in a barrel. All it takes for your mother to blame me for anything is my involvement in it in any way. You know that."

Dudley chuckled. "Yeah, I suppose. But it's been a while since I've seen her this mad. Dad too, a bit, but especially Mum. I did try to tell her that it was written by someone you didn't like, but I'm not sure she even heard me. Too busy ranting."

"How did she react to the quotes from you?" wondered Harry. "She couldn't have been happy about that."

With a small grin, Dudley replied, "I think her exact words were, 'Look at this, they even made up quotes that Dudley supposedly said! What has Harry been telling them?'"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I should have been able to predict that. I don't suppose you set her straight."

"Didn't really see the point," said Dudley with a light shrug.

"No, I suppose not," Harry agreed. "Here's the funny thing. She knows I'm a big celebrity in the wizarding world, and she knows that in the Muggle world, celebrities' families are often written about in the tabloids, and the celebrities would rather the stories weren't written, whether they're true or not. She knows this, but it would never enter her mind that this wasn't something I wanted. It would never occur to her to give me the benefit of the doubt. Just the opposite; she would always start out from the idea that whatever made me look worst was right, and go from there."

"But you can see why she was mad, though," Dudley pointed out, "and why she blamed you. It really looked like you were trashing them."

"Yes, it did, I wouldn't argue with that," agreed Harry. "I can see why they'd be really angry. But... I'm wondering, Dudley... besides what Hugo said, about wanting to see our world, why did you come over here?"

Dudley looked as though he didn't quite know how to answer the question at first. "I guess I wanted to know what you thought, how it looked to you. I had kind of figured out that the article wasn't something you wanted, from the way you acted with her the other day. You were pretty mad. Also, you had chances to trash them in interviews for the other articles, and you didn't, you tried not to answer the

questions. I wanted to be able to tell Mum what you thought of it, and that you weren't attacking them."

Harry made a gesture of indifference. "It's not going to do any good, Dudley. She's going to think what she thinks."

Ginny spoke up. "Maybe, but it wouldn't hurt to tell Dudley anyway, since he's here. Maybe it will change something, you can't know."

Harry looked at her with affection, and took her hand. "It's not impossible that you're right, but you've never met his mother. I hope you never have to."

"Probably better that I don't," she acknowledged. "I'd have a few things to say, and there'd probably be a screaming match. But still..."

Sighing, Harry acquiesced. "All right, if you want to tell her something, Dudley, this is what you can tell her. I had nothing to do with the article, I wasn't interviewed for it, and if there was some way I could have prevented it from being written, I would have. The times I'm quoted in the article were from when I was talking to friends, and the reporter overheard... well, you can explain to her how that worked. The quotes were taken out of context, of course. And there were some things that weren't in the article that should have been. For example, I'm sure Skeeter has heard me say that I think your parents are the way they are about wizards because they're scared of them, but she didn't mention it. I have no desire to make them look bad.

"But, and you can say this to them or not, the fact is that the article isn't that far from the truth. All the quotes from me are accurate, and they're true. All of the facts she relates are true; it's her implications and the way she makes things sound that are wrong. If they deny that they treated me

badly, then they're fooling themselves. Not that I care whether they fool themselves or not."

"The overall impression I get," said Ginny, looking at Harry compassionately, "is that you don't care what they think."

Harry shook his head. "I can't care what they think. That's... almost so fundamental to me that I wouldn't have thought to even say it. I mean... it's funny, I never thought about this consciously before, but... a few times at Muggle schools, before I was eleven, I got complimented or praised by teachers. Not often, but occasionally. It always felt strange, because it never happened at home, not once. I remember a few times when I tried to get her to say something nice about something I did, like a good score on a test, something I made for art class, like that. She either brushed me off or criticized it; I never got approval from them for anything, not once. I learned not to expect it, or hope for it. I would have been..." he paused and shrugged, looking for a phrase, "emotionally crushed, I guess, if I had. I had to not care about what they thought, it would have been too painful if I had. It was my way of coping, I guess." He paused, and with a small chuckle, said, "Skeeter would have loved this, to hear me say this and put it in the article. Fits in well with the 'poor, tragic Harry' theme. Anyway, so I just can't care what they think now. And I wouldn't care to try to work it out with them, it would be impossible. You know how they are about this, Dudley. They don't like to talk about things like this, and they would never be willing to admit what they did, or apologize. There would be no point."

Ginny's grip on his hand had grown tighter as he talked. After he finished, she moved closer to him on the sofa and pulled him into a hug. "It's all right," he said quietly. "It was a long time ago."

"I know," she said. He could hear the sadness in her voice. "I feel like I just want to hug you then, who you were then. I'm sure you could have used it."

His first thought was that that time was past, that it was too late, but he didn't want to say it to her. He just said, "Thanks," and they let go. Dudley was looking down; Harry wondered if he was trying hard not to react. He knew Dudley hardly ever saw any displays of affection like that except on television, and would normally disdain them.

"Well," Harry continued, "that's in the past, and it isn't something I like to think about that much. Just don't see the point. I guess I just thought of it because it explains why I don't care what they think now. Anyway, Dudley... I'm not sure what else I can think of to say."

Dudley nodded, and was silent for a half a minute. Then he said, "So, are you still going to come and do that thing, so they can't, you know..."

"Sure. I don't have to like your mother, but I will humor her. Probably this weekend, but of course I have to talk to Kingsley. He's the one I was with the other day, he's a senior Auror. He needs to arrange for my protection while I do it."

"I was wondering, do you really need to be protected?" asked Dudley. "I mean, now you can stop that killing spell, and you're really strong, can they really hurt you?"

"Not very easily, no," agreed Harry. "I'm not even sure it's that necessary for them to protect me, not like it was last year. It's mainly to be careful, which I understand. There are other things they could do to me to kill me, and I'm important enough that they don't want to take a small chance. There's... reason to believe, and I can't be any more

specific than that, that I'm the only person who can defeat Voldemort."

Dudley looked puzzled. "But that's not any secret, is it? I mean, I read about it in the articles, it's because of the energy-of-love thing, right? I thought that was the whole reason you found this in the first place, you needed it to fight him. From what you said, it sounds like love is like kryptonite to him."

Harry chuckled. "Good analogy, that's about right. I meant, there's other reason to think so. Anyway, yeah, they just don't want to take any chances. With all those attempts on my life in the past year, I can see why." Harry paused, then said, "Well, since you're here, let me give you a tour of the house, show you all the interesting magical stuff."

Dudley grinned. "Cool, thanks. Also, I was wondering something... Mum's gone for another couple hours, I thought maybe you could take me to that place that you said is like downtown London for wizards. I'd really like to see that."

Harry's face reflected his doubt. "I would, but it's not a good time right now, for two reasons. One, I'd have to be protected, and the Aurors are tired from all the work they've been doing lately. I don't want to put them out for something that's not really necessary. Also, I'd be recognized by... well, pretty much everybody, and approached by some people, who would also want to know who you were. Then, it would be like, 'This is my cousin, Dudley.' 'Oh, yes, I read about you this morning. Why did you need two bedrooms?' Or, 'Why were your parents so awful to him? Why should they hate wizards so much?' You get the idea; it would be like with Ron and Pansy, only much worse. It wouldn't be real pleasant for you."

Dudley nodded in resignation. "Hadn't thought of that. Too bad, I would've liked to see it."

"You will, someday," Harry assured him. "As time passes, people will forget about it. Well, let's show you around." They stood, and walked over to Molly's special clock. "First, there's this clock, which tells where every family member is, kind of. You see each person's name on one of the hands, see, Arthur's is 'work' and Molly's is 'shopping'... wait, there's one for me? When did this happen?"

"I think she had it done just before we got back for the summer," said Ginny. "She had Percy's changed to be you." They exchanged a look, remembering their sorrow for Molly at the loss of Percy. Harry briefly explained what had happened to Percy, then continued showing Dudley around.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 6, The Golden Dragon: Harry and Ginny enjoy their first dinner out, but come home to shocking news that deals yet another emotional blow to Hermione.

From Chapter 6: Kingsley looked at Harry sympathetically; Harry felt a chill go down his spine without being sure why.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6

The Golden Dragon

Harry wished he could have enjoyed the day off more, but the situation with Skeeter made it difficult to feel like relaxing. He had been through trials before, but they had usually involved an enemy he could fight, something he could do. Here there was nothing he could do but wait and see what happened. He spent the day with Ginny and his friends, and had yet another session with Snape, who told Harry that he would not be required Friday. Harry didn't know whether or not it was because of his dinner plans. He went to bed at nine o'clock, feeling odd sleeping in his bed at the Burrow again.

At ten to five the next day, Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Pansy were in the living room. Harry was teaching dueling to Ginny and Pansy, and Ron was playing his chess computer. The fireplace lit up, and Neville walked through, followed by Hermione. They had left to meet Kingsley at four o'clock; Harry was surprised that the meeting had taken so long. "That was close, we're supposed to meet Archibald at five."

She tilted her head in apology. "Kingsley had some questions."

Ron put the chess computer aside. "Well, what did he say?"

"He's pretty concerned," said Neville. "Mainly about the operational stuff, of course, and the stuff about me. Not that he doesn't care if Harry gets put through the wringer, but those were the main things he talked about. He knows Hugo,

of course, and he knows that if Hugo says that she was making an empty threat about revealing operational stuff, then she was. But he's still very unhappy that someone like her knows any operational details. I think he was seriously considering doing a Memory Charm on her, get that out of her memory."

Ron's eyebrows went up. "Can they do that? I mean, legally?"

Neville nodded. "Aurors have a lot of license, much more than I realized when Harry and I started training with them. It's not quite the case that they can do anything they want, but it seems like it's pretty close sometimes. I think that's why they have all those character tests that you have to pass before you can join, you get given a lot of responsibility. You have to be able to not abuse it. But yes, they can do it."

"It'd be nice if they could do one to get rid of all the stuff she knows about Harry, too, while they're at it," said Pansy.

"I got the impression that he would if he could," said Hermione. "While he was focused on the operational stuff, I could tell he was really unhappy about what Harry was facing. But, of course, it's not feasible. They'd have to make her forget almost the last two years of her life, which you can't do. They could try to take out particular details, like Harry being a Legilimens, but if she spent a lot of time around while Dumbledore was teaching it to him, even that would be too much to erase."

"The other problem with that," added Neville, "is that there's no telling what she's written down. They'd have to break into her place, do a search, and even then they'd have to wonder whether she'd hidden anything away anywhere else

or not. I think he's going to think about what to do, but I think he is going to do something. At one point he said, "Skeeter having that kind of information is just unacceptable."

"I'd agree with that," said Harry. "The way she is, who knows who she'd tell, for whatever reason. Even the fact that she threatened to reveal it shows she's not exactly all right."

"Kingsley said that, too," said Neville.

"What did he say about your situation, Neville?" asked Ron, referring to the possibility of it being revealed that Neville had tortured Lestrage.

"I think he's considering using a Memory Charm for that, too," said Neville. "Of course, then if she has it written down, or has told another person just to be safe, then it's twice as bad. But he did say that even if she does reveal it, I shouldn't worry."

"He was very nice about it," said Hermione, her tone showing that she had very much appreciated Kingsley's protectiveness of Neville. "He made it clear that he and the Aurors will do whatever it takes to help Neville, but he said he didn't think it would even come to that point. He's pretty sure that if she tried to get it printed in the Prophet, he could stop it. He said he'd talk to the people he knows at the Prophet, get them to tell him in advance if anyone writes anything that mentions the Aurors, especially if Skeeter tries to write anything."

"But he's not going to do that yet, right?" asked Ginny. "Does he know not to do anything until Sunday?"

"Yes, we told him about what Hugo's going to do," confirmed Hermione. "He thought it was a good idea, and he'll make

sure nothing he does can get back to her before then. Oh, Harry, it may interest you to know that Skeeter tried to include, in her article about you yesterday, the fact that you captured Malfoy. She wanted to be the one to break it, and its connection to the story would have been that you saved Dudley's life, that his parents didn't even thank you, and so forth. Evidently the person Kingsley knows at the Prophet thought it was strange that nobody knew about it, and called Kingsley to ask about it. Kingsley had a fit, he said, and he made sure any reference to that was taken out."

"Why?" wondered Pansy.

"Because we don't want the Death Eaters to know the circumstances of Malfoy's capture," explained Harry. "They think he tried to go straight to the Portkey. The reason they decided to stop after three consecutive captures was that they figure it means that the Aurors have gotten pretty skilled at super-fast Apparating. If they find out he disobeyed orders and got caught doing something stupid, they may decide that it's worth continuing to try. They definitely would if they knew that the third capture was close to being blind luck."

"I don't know, Harry," said Ginny. "I'm not saying I know what caused it, but somehow I don't think it was just blind luck. I think that Auror was right, that the energy of love had something to do with it."

"Then why have I never managed anything like that before, during drills?" asked Harry.

"I'm not saying I know," Ginny pointed out. "It just makes sense. But maybe the reason is that in drills, it wasn't that important. Think about the other times you did something amazing using the energy of love: when you absolutely had

to. Both of the shields, and don't forget that beam you used when you thought Hermione was going to be tortured. You knew it could be the third capture, it was really important, and you staked it all on your intuition. Maybe the energy of love is most effective when it's most needed. We know so little about it, who knows?"

There was silence for a few seconds. With a wry smile, Harry said, "We should do some tests, find out whether that's true or not."

The others chuckled. "Ah, the annoyances of discovering a new type of magic," said Ron. "But what Ginny said makes sense. After all, with the Cruciatus and Killing Curse shields, you can't just bring them up anytime, but only when you need them."

"Anyway, we should wrap this up, because Harry and I need to go see Dentus in a few minutes," said Hermione. "As for your particular jeopardy, Harry, he didn't have much specific advice about what could be done about that, except that he said that of course he'd do whatever he could that would be helpful to you. And he did promise not to tell anybody until Sunday, except that he wants to talk to McGonagall about it as soon as possible. I told him I'd tell her tonight while Harry and Ginny are at the restaurant, so he'll talk to her after that." She gave Harry a sad and resigned look. "One down, two to go. Ready to go, Harry?"

Her continuing sense of guilt and responsibility were obvious, especially when she looked at him. He put an arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. "It'll be okay, Hermione."

She gave him a smile of gratitude, but it was a sad smile. "Are you sure you can't come up with a spell for this? Now

would be when it's most needed, after all."

"I wish it worked that way," he said. "Okay, let's go."

Hermione followed Harry through the fireplace, and they were standing in Archibald Dentus's living room. He greeted them, and his wife came in to say hello and offer to get them something to drink, which they declined. She chatted with Harry for a minute about the Joining of Hands, expressing pleasure that her calling her husband had given Harry the idea to have it done. She then withdrew, and Dentus, Harry, and Hermione took seats.

Hermione told her story, taking about ten minutes to do so. Dentus interrupted twice to clarify points, but otherwise listened and said nothing. His eyebrows went high as Hermione finished, explaining Skeeter's demands and threats. He thought silently for a minute, then finally said, "I must say, even for one accustomed to the bare-knuckled world of political infighting, this is rather nasty. I suspect that that's because when things like this are done in politics, it's usually based on a sober appraisal of one's best interests, a calculation which Skeeter clearly has not made. Objectively, her best interests are served by you taking the deal, but you say that Hugo says she hopes you don't, which is not rational. Of course, revenge usually isn't rational."

"First of all, what kind of legal danger is Hermione in?" asked Harry. He knew that she wasn't overly concerned about that, but he was.

"It's not zero, but it's very small. Legally speaking, I'd advise her not to confess what she's done in the Prophet, because without that there's no evidence of what she did. She exposes herself to a small amount of risk by doing this to protect you." Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked back at

him sharply, clearly communicating that she would listen to no arguments from him. Noting their byplay, Dentus continued, "It's a very small amount of risk, Harry. Certain aspects of the situation help her: she was only fourteen, she reaped no personal reward from her actions, she was arguably provoked, and Skeeter was doing something against the law. The fact that she's recently performed great services for the wizarding world, is a close friend of yours, has been made Head Girl at Hogwarts, and will confess publicly to protect you are not directly relevant, but as political factors will definitely be considered. My professional opinion is that Hermione will suffer no legal consequences for what she's done. Every factor breaks in her favor."

Still not happy, Harry decided to press Dentus. "Archibald, if it were your daughter, would you advise her to do what Hermione's doing?"

Hermione gave Harry an annoyed glance, but Dentus smiled at the protective impulse behind Harry's question. "Yes, I would, Harry. Not because the legal risk is zero, but because I would want her to, and be proud of her for, taking responsibility for what she had done and protecting her friend who her actions helped put in danger, rather than thinking of herself first." Now, Hermione raised her eyebrows at Harry in a 'see, don't argue with me' way, as Harry's face registered his unhappiness. "Sorry, Harry, I know that wasn't the answer you were looking for. But it is right. On that, I could keep an eye on it and make sure nothing untoward happens, but really, it won't.

"Moving on to the danger you face, Harry, what Hugo's doing for you will be extremely helpful, much more than anything I can do. After what he'll write, he's correct when he says that Skeeter will never write for the Prophet again. This is where his unusual magical ability helps you greatly: if

he writes it, people know it's true, they have confidence in it. His stating as fact what she did is obviously not legal proof, but anyone who matters will be convinced. She may have friends, but anyone who's not a true personal friend will abandon her after that. They'll see the writing on the wall, even if she doesn't.

"Of course she can write the book or gossip about you to anyone she wants; there's nothing you, or I, can do about that. But Hugo is again right when he says that she'll be thoroughly discredited. If she had the Prophet as a mouthpiece, she could definitely make your lives miserable. As it is, I think she's going to focus her energy on the book, and maybe try to find people in the Ministry who don't like you and whisper in their ears. But she will definitely be marginalized."

"Maybe she and Umbridge will get together," said Hermione. Harry wasn't sure whether she intended to be humorous or not.

"It wouldn't surprise me, actually," said Dentus. "She might go looking for Umbridge, figuring they could help each other. For all we know, she might have been at that dinner. If she was, she knows what I helped have done to Umbridge, and would tell her about it. In fact... the more I think about it, their interests dovetail nicely. If Skeeter could damage your reputation, Harry, it would make following through on the threat to Umbridge more difficult. That would help Umbridge's comeback, and she in turn could help Skeeter from within the system. I really do wonder if they've talked already.

"Don't worry, though, it's not going to happen that way, since Skeeter's not going to manage to do anything to your reputation, Harry. Hugo's article will be the truth, and it'll

put her where she deserves to be. Unless something very strange happens—and don't worry, I'll keep my eyes open—she's the one whose reputation will take a beating."

Harry nodded. He hadn't expected Dentus to do anything in particular; it was more that they needed him for advice than anything else. To Harry's surprise, Hermione had an unrelated question. "Archibald, do you have an opinion on who's going to be the next Minister of Magic?"

Dentus grinned. "Now, there's a question Harry would never ask. He's told me that you read him things from the paper to keep him informed. Tell me, do you stay informed mainly to help him, or just because you want to?"

She shrugged. "Maybe a little bit of both. I just think it's a good idea to be informed, but I know it could help him too. Of course, he has you looking out for him in this way, so maybe it's not so necessary, but I do it anyway."

"No, it's good that you do," Dentus assured her. "There are some things I'd have to use my time explaining to him if you hadn't already told him, so I have more time to teach him about the whole system, what he needs to know. The more he gets exposed to this, the better."

"Listening to you two talk like this makes me feel like... I don't know, like I'm dumb and you're being nice and tolerant by helping me," said Harry. He felt mildly embarrassed, but recognized that both were trying to help him.

"Well, if you paid attention by yourself..." Hermione sounded almost apologetic, rather than condescending as she had at times in the past when saying such things. Harry wondered if it was because her ego had taken such a beating recently that she wasn't inclined to feel superior to anyone.

"Not dumb, Harry, just not interested. You're pretty smart, actually, I've discovered," said Dentus kindly. "You just need to know more than most seventeen-year-olds do. It's like, if you're rich, you need to know enough not to be swindled or robbed. You have political capital, and there are things you need to know so you don't get swindled out of it, so to speak, get taken advantage of. You do very well considering your age and your level of interest in the topic.

"As for your question, Hermione, I assume you ask because you know that the question of who the Minister of Magic is will affect Harry, important as he now is?" She nodded. "Of course you're right, it definitely will. As you've probably read in the Prophet, there are a few leading candidates, but there's one who I think has the inside track. His name is Rudolphus Bright, you may have seen his name in the Prophet."

"Just a little," said Hermione. "His name is one of the ones I've seen mentioned, but not as much as the others."

"Yes, I've seen that too," agreed Dentus, "but I think the political reporters are behind the story here. I'm sure Hugo would have him pegged as the front-runner if he did political reporting."

"Why doesn't he, by the way?" asked Harry.

"He did, a little, when he started out," explained Dentus, "but it didn't take long for politicians to realize that they shouldn't talk to him. He picks up so much, a lot more than they want him to. As I've said many times, politicians lie all the time, it's very routine. He didn't write explicitly that they lied, but the way he wrote things made it clear if you read between the lines. Even if he didn't write it, he easily figured out things politicians didn't want him or anyone knowing.

"Back to Bright, he's not written about so much because he's not as well-known as the others. He's younger, only forty-five, but he's a very, very smart politician with good instincts. He was one of the few not to jump into Fudge's camp with both feet when Fudge broke with Dumbledore over Voldemort's return. He didn't resign like I did, but he distanced himself from Fudge and the others, taking a short-term risk which has now paid off. Unlike Fudge, he's quick on his feet and a good speaker, and he has the appearance of conviction and sincerity."

"Do you mean by saying it that way that he doesn't have true conviction and sincerity?" asked Hermione.

Dentus gave her a small smile. "No, Hermione, I'm saying that he's so good, I can't tell. He's very good with people. When he talks to people, they always come away thinking, 'Now, there's a smart man, he thinks like I do,' even if his opinions are somewhat different from theirs. A good way of putting it is to say that he connects with people. A lot of politicians are either good with people, or good at political infighting. He's good at both. For example, Harry, remember that question Fudge fumbled when we met you in Albus's office? Bright would have told you exactly what you wanted to hear. He'd have assured you that only for the very best of reasons would anything similar be done, that the Ministry takes people's rights very seriously, and so forth. I'm not saying it wouldn't have been the truth, just that he would have known what to say.

"And while we're on the subject, Harry... since we haven't talked since Fudge was killed, I want to make sure you understand something: whoever becomes the next Minister of Magic is going to want to be your friend. Even if he doesn't ask you to stand with him in public and say what a great person he is, your influence will be such that any

association with you will be to his benefit. You obviously have to be very careful with this. Not that you should keep your distance deliberately, but do what Albus always did: be pleasant, sincere, and judge them on their actions, not their words or their personality. If you can do that, you should be all right."

Harry nodded, and was silent as he tried to digest what Dentus said. Hermione asked, "Archibald, is it going to be a problem for you if Skeeter tells people in the Ministry that you're helping Harry? I assume most people don't know."

"Yes, I'd rather people didn't know that," agreed Dentus. "Not for my sake—I'd be even more influential if people knew I had Harry's confidence—but for Harry's. People would deal with me differently if they knew, and I couldn't give Harry as good information as I can now. I'm resigned to the idea that Skeeter will tell people, which isn't good. I didn't think to mention it because Harry has much bigger problems than that."

Hermione nodded ruefully. "Yes, he does, and every time I think of that I have to stop myself from saying, 'yes, and it's my fault.' I know Harry's getting tired of that."

"I don't know if this will help, Hermione," said Dentus sympathetically, "but in political terms, what you did wasn't all that bad. In a way, it's a lot like what I suggested be done to Umbridge."

She made a facial expression that was the equivalent of a shrug. "I suppose it helps a little, but I have to admit that the morality of what I did bothers me much less than the effect it's had on the people I care about. If Skeeter hadn't been exposed, and so come after my friends and I, I wouldn't

be sitting around agonizing over the morality of what I did. I would have been relaxing and enjoying my summer."

"We learn by our mistakes," said Dentus. "One of the harder parts of life, I'm afraid. I know how you feel. I've had other people pay for my mistakes. At least Harry has friends, people who will do whatever they can to help. I have a feeling the damage from this won't be as bad as you've feared."

"I sure hope you're right, Archibald," Hermione said earnestly. "I want to thank you, anyway. You've been a big help."

Dentus looked mildly surprised. "Not really. All I can do is give you information and advice, watch your backs a bit."

"When you're under attack like I've been, like we've been, the past few days, somebody doing that for you is important. I really appreciate it."

"Me too, obviously," agreed Harry.

Dentus inclined his head in acknowledgment. "You're quite welcome. I'm happy to do whatever I can, I just wish it could be more." Having taken in Hermione's cue that they were ready to leave, he added, "Can I persuade you to stay for dinner?"

Hermione and Harry chuckled. "Harry and Ginny are going to the Golden Dragon tonight," Hermione explained. "It'll be the first time they've really been out together for a nice evening."

"Committed for life before even going out on a date," said Dentus, grinning. "You certainly deserve it. The Aurors are keeping the details of how the Apparation crisis ended

classified, as well they should, but they did let it be known to the Ministry that you were 'instrumental' in bringing it to an end. Somehow, I wasn't surprised."

Harry gave him a self-deprecating smile. "Technically, they're right, but it's not quite how it sounds. There was a fair amount of luck involved. I'll tell you about it someday, after Voldemort is defeated."

"I'll bet there'll be a lot of interesting stories you can tell after he's defeated," said Dentus. "I look forward to hearing them." He stood, as did Harry and Hermione. "Well, I'll let you be on your way, then. Have a great time, Harry, and keep your chins up, both of you." They thanked him, and went back to the Burrow.

At twenty past seven, all the residents of the Burrow and Neville were sitting in the living room talking. The main topic of conversation was Harry and Ginny's dinner, despite Harry's two attempts to steer the conversation in a different direction. As Molly told everyone about an early date of her and Arthur's, the fireplace lit up. Tonks walked out, followed by Cassandra, who Harry saw give Neville a quick smile and nod.

"You're our security?" asked Harry, surprised that the two Aurors he knew best happened to be the ones assigned to watch him. "How did it end up being you two?"

"Why, we volunteered the loudest, of course," said Tonks matter-of-factly. "Do you think we were going to miss an opportunity to look over your shoulder on your first big night out? Providing security is such a great excuse."

"Don't worry, once you go into the restaurant, you won't even see us," assured Cassandra. "Although what's ironic is that if there's a serious threat, you'll be the ones protecting

us, not vice versa. We'll be just conspicuous enough that people will know you're being... well, I was going to say 'protected,' but maybe 'watched' is a better word. We're there mainly so you don't have to be looking over your shoulders all the time."

"And we appreciate it," said Ginny. "Are we ready?"

"I guess so," answered Harry. He suddenly felt nervous, and wondered what had given him the idea to do this. You're just uneasy because you're doing something you've never done before, he told himself. Just relax. Focus on love, he thought, then smiled at the idea that such a thing would be necessary.

Ginny seemed to be reading his expressions. "It'll be fine, Harry, don't worry. We'll have a good time." She then leaned into him and whispered, "You don't have to impress me. You do that all the time, just by being yourself." He smiled, and impulsively turned and kissed her.

There was light laughter, mostly from the women present. "I'd love to know what that was," said a smiling Pansy.

"Harry can tell you sometime, if he wants," replied Ginny. Harry knew she expected him not to because of embarrassment. They said goodbye and headed to the fireplace; Molly walked over to give each a kiss before they left. Tonks went through the fireplace first, followed by Harry, then Ginny, and finally Cassandra.

As they walked through Diagon Alley, Tonks remained several feet in front of them, and Cassandra, several feet behind. They were in their professional mode, and Harry knew he shouldn't try to talk to them for the rest of the evening. He put an arm around Ginny as they walked, and

she put one around him. "This feels strange," he said. "I haven't been out in public since... when was the last time?"

She thought for a few seconds. "The last Hogsmeade day, so almost three months ago."

"Sometimes I think I should go out sometime, but as someone else," he mused. "Have Hermione make some Polyjuice Potion, somehow find a hair or something from a random person. I could walk around and nobody would look at me, or react when they saw me. It's been so long since that's happened, it would be strange."

"All we have to do for that is go somewhere in the Muggle world," pointed out Ginny.

"That's true," he agreed. "But of course we can't for now, or at least we shouldn't. I always think of the department store. Don't want Muggles to get caught in the crossfire."

"I don't know," said Ginny, looking thoughtful. "I wonder if he's even going to try anymore. I mean, he loses people every time he tries. With the ones he lost to the Apparation thing, I don't think he'll be in the mood to take chances."

"I hope you're right," he said. Looking around, he added, "Funny, it's a Friday night, lots of people around, but I haven't been approached. Usually I would have been by now, by somebody all thrilled to meet Harry Potter."

She gave him a sideways glance. "Harry, I understand why you feel that way, but you have to remember, it's not just the Boy Who Lived that they're meeting anymore, but the one who stood up to Voldemort, the one who discovered the energy of love. Maybe you didn't deserve those reactions before, but you do now. You can't keep acting like people are being silly by reacting that way."

He reluctantly nodded. "I suppose so, it's just such a reflex. It's always been a struggle just to be polite, not to say, 'Oh, come on, just leave me alone.' I know it sounds really ungrateful, but..."

"I do understand, probably better than most people, just from seeing it happen to you so often," she said. "But as for right now, I'd bet it's because of our escorts. They're not exactly being subtle, so people might think twice about stopping to say hello."

"I guess that's the bright side of being guarded," joked Harry. Then he had another thought, and sighed. "It's funny, I say that, and then I feel bad because I think of what Albus would do if he were in my situation. He'd smile, be truly pleased that people felt that way, chat with them for a minute, that sort of thing. I'm just uncomfortable and hope they go away as soon as possible."

"You really shouldn't be holding yourself up to that kind of standard," Ginny responded, giving him a gentle squeeze with the arm around his waist. "Also, like you said, your reaction is kind of a reflex, because it did happen all the time when you hadn't yet done anything to deserve it. I think it's fair that you get some time to get used to it."

"Well, I am seventeen," he said, half-seriously. "I suppose I should be acting like an adult—"

"Now, that'd take all the fun out of life, wouldn't it?" asked a familiar voice from behind. Harry turned to see Fred and George; he and Ginny smiled and stopped walking.

"Don't worry, nobody will ever expect it of you two," Ginny assured them. "I think people would be disappointed. I know I would be. So, you two just happened to be passing by?"

"Yes, indeed," agreed George with such exaggerated enthusiasm as to make it clear that it was a joke. "We just happened to be walking in the general area which is on a line between the Diagon Alley fireplace and the Golden Dragon at just before seven-thirty, for no particular reason." Fred nodded vigorously and innocently.

"Ron told you?" asked Harry.

Fred and George rolled their eyes. "You mean, our brother, the Auror?" asked Fred.

"No, he's too busy showing off his robes to pay attention to your social life," put in George.

Ginny gave them a disapproving look. "Come on, he's proud of getting to wear them, I don't think anyone can blame him for that. And Harry and I are wearing them right now, why not make fun of us?"

"I'm just as happy I didn't have to bother with dress robes," Harry muttered.

"See, that's it exactly," said George. "Harry doesn't care. And as for you, you didn't come running into the shop the first day you could, all, 'Look at me! Look at my robes!'" George had adopted a high-pitched, mocking tone.

"Somehow, I don't think those were his exact words," said Ginny.

"It couldn't have been clearer, which you know as well as we do," replied Fred.

Harry felt that he should stick up for Ron. "Is it so strange that he'd be proud of it? It is an accomplishment. Learning those spells isn't easy."

Fred shrugged. "It was just the way he was being about it. Maybe you had to be there."

"Bet you had a good go at him," said Ginny.

Fred and George exchanged a look of regret. "Not really," said George.

"A little bit," added Fred. "But Mum had told us about him and Pansy, and we had decided, in an uncharacteristic fit of generosity, that we were going to go easy on him the first few times we saw him when he was with her. Also, she was wearing them too. She wasn't being like him, of course, but we still decided to hold back."

"Difficult as it was," agreed George. "No, we heard about you two from Mum, so we thought we'd come over and say hello. Since you never come 'round the shop."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Fred cut him off. "He's just kidding, Harry, we know you have to drag two Aurors with you wherever you go. No offense, ladies."

"It's more a matter of, I don't want to have to put them out all the time," explained Harry. "Combining that, the way I get recognized, and the fact that I have her," he gave Ginny a squeeze, "and the rest of my friends at the Burrow, it's easy to decide not to bother going out."

"Well, we'd love to stay and chat, you two, but it's almost seven-thirty, so you should be getting along," said George. "So, have a nice time."

"And be careful what you eat, I hear they have some strange food there," added Fred. With a cheery wave, they walked away.

Harry chuckled and shook his head as they started walking again. "I wonder if those two are ever going to change."

"Or, worse, what if only one of them did?" suggested Ginny. "We're so used to them being practically the same, it would really be strange if one of them got more serious and one stayed the same. Or, if one got married and one didn't."

"They could find themselves a pair of twins to marry," said Harry. "They should have dated Parvati and Padma."

"Well, you and Ron already did that," teased Ginny.

Harry winced slightly at the memory. "Those weren't really dates," he said, embarrassed. "We didn't even want to go, I only got a date because I absolutely had to. We hardly paid attention to them after the first dance. I feel pretty stupid thinking about it now."

Ginny shrugged. "It doesn't seem very fair, making a fourteen-year-old boy go on a date if he doesn't want to. You know, thinking about that... I don't say this to make you feel bad, but I was really hoping you'd ask me. Even if it had been because you couldn't find anyone else, I still would have been really happy."

He felt even more embarrassed. "I'm sorry," he said simply.

"It's okay, I'm glad you didn't, now," she said, taking his hand. "You didn't want to be there, and you wouldn't have paid any attention to me, either. It would have been really bad for me. It's like you said about your childhood; whatever I went through then was worth it because of what I have now." She looked at him and smiled, managing to communicate that what she'd said last had been an understatement.

He returned her smile as they approached the restaurant. "I'm really glad you feel that way," he said. Tonks entered the restaurant, but didn't hold the door open for Harry and Ginny; he assumed she wanted to keep her full attention ahead of her, not looking back for a second unnecessarily. Harry pushed the ornate door open and went through first, holding it open for Ginny to enter behind him. He immediately wondered if he should have opened it and let her go first, as he had seen people do in Muggle movies, but she had no reaction suggesting he should have. I have to learn things like this, he thought.

He turned his attention to the restaurant's greeter, who took a look at him and gaped slightly before recovering. "Hello," said Harry uncertainly, "our reservations were made by--"

"Mr. Shackbolt, of course," the man said smoothly. "Please come this way, Professor, ma'am." As they moved to follow him, Harry and Ginny exchanged a look; her face registered amusement and incredulity. 'Ma'am?' she mouthed. Harry grinned at her, realizing it had to be the first time she had ever been called that. He turned his head forward and followed the man. As Harry walked, he couldn't help but gawk at the chandeliers and the artwork on the walls; again, he had no experience with this sort of thing except what he had seen in the Muggle media. It struck him that it didn't look all that different than what he had seen there, except that some of the artwork depicted dragons, unicorns, hippogriffs, and other magical creatures.

They were led to a table in an alcove, mostly shielded from the view of other diners. They sat, and were given menus. "Please summon us when you are ready to order," the man said, and moved off.

Just as the man moved out of sight, Harry realized he wanted to ask a question. He turned to Ginny and asked, "How are we supposed to summon them?"

"You just tap the table with your wand," she explained. "Apparently it works this way at all nice restaurants."

"I suppose you're going to have to explain things like this to me," he said, embarrassed at his lack of understanding of such things. "I probably would have just sent my dog for them."

She laughed at the thought. "That would have worked, too. I'd almost ask you to do it, just to see what they'd say. They'd probably compliment you on how cute it is."

They opened their menus, Harry looking nervous. "Wow, they really do have lots of things. I haven't heard of half of this stuff."

"Don't pay attention to what Fred and George said, Harry," she chided him. "Of course, that should go without saying, in any situation... anyway, don't worry about it, just order what you want. You don't have to order something exotic and fancy just because we're here. Just look for something you know you like. You can always experiment when we come here some other time."

He raised his eyebrows. "Do you think we'll be coming here again?"

"I don't see why not," she replied as she looked at the menu. "Not so often, obviously; this place is pretty expensive. But once in a while, we could probably afford it."

His brow furrowed as he looked at the menu. "Speaking of which, I don't see any prices here. I thought they usually

had them on menus."

"You wave your wand over an item, and it shows the price," she explained.

"Of course, I should have thought of that," he chuckled. He held his wand over the lamb dish he was looking at. Suddenly a shining gold Galleon appeared on the right of the page next to the entry, with a black '9' in the center of the Galleon. "Nine Galleons?" he gaped.

"Well, it is the most expensive restaurant in Diagon Alley," she said reasonably, as she waved her wand over various menu items. "That seems to be about the average price for an entree. Obviously you shouldn't think about the price. The whole point of coming to a restaurant like this is that you know you can afford it. That's part of the reason you have to use your wand to see the prices, so you don't have to think about it if you don't want to."

"I guess that makes sense," he agreed. "Funny how you have to explain everything to me."

"And I've never even been here before. I have been in nice restaurants, just not this one. Of course, Mum's been here, and she told me a lot about it. She said that when she was there, when you tapped the table with your wand to summon them, they'd Apparate to your table. It was a point of pride for them to be there instantly. Of course they can't do that these days, but I bet they still get here pretty fast. It's just little things like that, providing the best service they can. Also, they don't use house-elves, which some restaurants do. And all the plates, silverware, and so on are real."

Harry was puzzled. "Real, as opposed to..."

"Conjured," she replied, as he made an 'oh, of course' face. "You can't tell the difference, which is why most restaurants conjure everything like that; it's more convenient, because it doesn't have to be washed, it can just be Vanished."

"So many things about wizarding life I still don't know," he remarked. They were silent for a minute as both studied their menus. Having made their decisions, they put away their menus, and Harry tapped the table with his wand. A man who Harry estimated was in his late fifties, with short black hair, a round face, and a seemingly permanent smile, appeared in less than ten seconds.

"Good evening, Professor, Miss Weasley. I am Rupert Wilmington, the manager of the Golden Dragon, and I will be serving you. We are truly pleased to have you here this evening. Are you ready to order?"

"Uh, yes, thank you," said Harry, unaccustomed to being treated with such deference. Still smiling, Wilmington took their orders, then asked, "Will you be having wine, or ale, with your meal, Professor?"

Ginny smiled as Harry's eyebrows rose. "That's right, you're seventeen now, you can have that if you want," she reminded him.

He thought about it. "I'd kind of like to," he said to Ginny, "but the thing is, we could be called, we could have to Disapparate out of here on a second's notice. I wouldn't want to go into that kind of situation after drinking a glass of wine or something like that."

"I don't think one glass of wine or ale is going to get you drunk, especially if it's with a meal."

"Maybe not, but it could slow me down," he said reluctantly. "I've been in enough of these situations where a second can make all the difference that I'd rather not risk it."

"But you could be called any time," she argued. "Are you not going to drink alcohol for the rest of your life?"

Harry sighed. "No, not for the rest of my life. Just until Voldemort is defeated."

He saw a combination of sympathy and irritation in her face and tone. "You have to live a life, Harry. You have to do things that people do."

"I do," he replied. "I have you, remember? I thought I would never do that. But that was important, so I did it. Drinking alcohol isn't important." His expression became more serious. "Lives could depend on me. You know that. Just last week, Hermione and Neville... that just happened suddenly, nobody expected it. Something could happen again." He looked up at Wilmington, who regarded him politely, though his smile appeared to have faded somewhat. "Just water, please." Looking back at Ginny, he added, "After he's defeated, I promise to come back here and have wine, ale, or whatever."

Wilmington's expression was now serious; Harry had the impression that it was not a face he often showed to customers. "I look forward to that day, Professor, with great anticipation. We will be very pleased to have you back." He took Ginny's drink order, then retreated.

Ginny looked at him sadly. She extended her hand across the table, and he took it. "I love you so much," she said.

He nodded. "I love you too." They looked into each other's eyes, lost in the moment and in each other's love. Then,

looking around, he said, "What I said was right, though. I never thought I would do this."

"You mean, eat in such a nice restaurant?" she teased him, looking around as he had been.

"That, too," he chuckled. "No, I never thought I would let myself fall in love. I thought that would have to be one of those things that had to wait until he was gone. I had no idea how strong it was, that it couldn't be put off. It was like, I just got swept away."

"And I still can't believe sometimes that I'm the one who swept you away," she said, her face showing both her love and her wonder at what had happened.

"I, on the other hand, have no trouble believing it," he countered. He drifted for a minute, lost in thought. Then he saw her giving him a quizzical look, asking him without words what he was thinking. "I was just remembering my conversation with Neville and Hermione, at the end of the shift where we got the three Death Eaters," he explained. "They had spent most of that time talking, after they had seen his grandmother in the Pensieve. They had a lot to work out."

Ginny cut in while Harry was between sentences. "I know, she told Pansy and I a lot about it last night. We talked for, like, three or four hours, we were up pretty late, since it was the first night that all three of us slept there since this whole thing started. Anyway, she especially talked about the things she did wrong, how she wants to change. She felt so awful about what had happened. Not just bringing Skeeter down on us, but what she had done to Neville that she hadn't realized was bad."

He nodded. "Yes, she talked about that to me too, while he was there. I guess they figured that since I'd seen what was in the Pensieve, I knew about it anyway, so it didn't matter. Anyway, one thing she said was that she and Neville had never really thought about what their relationship was like, because they'd never had to, they'd never had any problems big enough to need to. She said you and I had probably never had a conversation about it, and I said we hadn't. For some reason I was just thinking about that, wondering how we would describe our relationship. I mean, if we had to analyze it, like they've had to."

"Interesting question. No, we haven't had to. It's much more fun just to experience it," she said with a smile. Then, turning more serious, she continued, "One of the things she said to us was about how she had all the power in the relationship, until she was afraid of losing him." Harry nodded to indicate that she'd said that to him as well. "So, with us, you obviously had all the power. You're Harry Potter, you've done amazing things. Over a hundred girls signed that scroll, you could have had nearly any girl you wanted. As for me, maybe a few boys were interested, but there was a huge imbalance, even if you wouldn't have thought of it that way.

"Then, all of a sudden, it evened out when we had the Joining of Hands done. I don't think you looked at it this way, but you just gave up that power, you handed me an equal share. Now, I can't leave you, but you can't leave me either—"

"But I was never going to," he interrupted, "so nothing really changed. I knew I would never leave you, so I didn't really have the power in the first place, if it was just from the idea that I could leave you more easily than you could leave me."

She shook her head. "No, you still had it; the fact that you would have never used it doesn't change the fact that you had it. It was like a basic fact in the situation. I couldn't know for a fact that your feelings wouldn't change. I worried that they would, so I was insecure, and I might have acted in ways that reflected that, even without you doing or feeling anything different. I might have given in more easily in arguments, done things to defer to you, afraid that you might stop loving me. It's based on what was in my head, not yours. Anyway, after the joining, it was equal. I didn't have to worry or think about that anymore, I could feel more comfortable, be myself without fear of losing you even if I happened to upset you. It's funny, because I think you just saw it for its value in being able to see each other in our hands and talk to each other at a distance. It changed our relationship in a really basic way, which you didn't even realize."

"Because from my point of view, it wasn't really a change," he pointed out. "So if it was a change, it was one I couldn't see." Now he smiled. "I'm just glad it was one that was so good for you."

"It was really good," she agreed, "but for both of us, in a way. If I had acted on my fears and not stood up for myself, I could have acted in ways that actually damaged our relationship, caused problems, problems that now won't happen."

"As for the rest of our relationship... it's hard to say, really. It's amazing to think that we've only been together for four months, it seems like longer. Maybe because it's been so intense. But I wonder if problems are the way you find out what your relationship is like, and we just don't know yet."

"In that case, I hope we never find out," said Harry, half-seriously.

"We will, unfortunately," she said. "Remember what Albus said, every relationship has problems. But whatever they are, we'll deal with them, I'm sure of that." Then she smiled and added, "Now, we have no choice."

He smiled as well. "That's all right with me."

They stopped talking for a moment as Wilmington came to their table with their drinks, hot hand towels, a small basket of bread, some butter, an assortment of cheese, and several different types of crackers. As he walked away, Harry said, "That's funny, I don't remember you mentioning any cheese."

"I think it's like the bread, just something they bring with every meal," she suggested. "I'm not completely sure. It's fine with me, though. I like cheese and crackers, and we don't get it that much at Hogwarts." He shrugged, and they started helping themselves.

After a few bites of cheese, Harry said, "I wanted to ask you about that thing with Fred and George, before we got here. Don't you think they were being a little..." He searched for a word, then gave up. "...not very nice, about Ron?"

She nodded. "Yes, I thought so, too. I mean, I'm sure they were right. You know how Ron can be, you remember how he was in third year, sorry, it would be your fourth year, telling that silly story about fighting the merpeople, or fifth year, he couldn't stop talking about the last Quidditch match. He can get a bit overexcited, a little obvious about how pleased with himself he is about something. I would think most people would be tolerant of that, and be happy for Ron. But it did really seem to annoy them."

"They couldn't be jealous of him, could they?" wondered Harry. "I mean, they've never wanted to be Aurors, or do anything but what they're doing."

"No, I don't think they're jealous. If I had to guess... I'd say that they reflexively disapprove of anything Percy-ish, and maybe they've sometimes wondered if Ron had a bit of Percy in him. Maybe they just have a sore spot about anyone who seems to be bragging. Or, maybe it bothers them more than they'd admit that they don't have Mum's approval, and Ron was showing off exactly the kind of thing she'd be proud of."

"Wish they'd give him a break," Harry grunted. "They don't know the half of what he's been through."

"That's true," she agreed. "Speaking of which, there's something I wanted to make sure you knew that I knew. Like I said, we talked about a lot of stuff last night, and some of it was the stuff in the letters Skeeter sent us. Hermione already knew, of course, but Pansy told me about what was in the letter Skeeter wrote Ron. She told me what happened."

Harry's eyebrows went high, which she noted. Answering his unasked question, she continued, "I think it was partly because she wanted to talk about how it affected her relationship with Ron, and she trusts me. Also, she knows it's not going to be private for very long anyway. Even if Skeeter doesn't get to write in the Prophet anymore, Pansy's sure that it'll be in the book she writes about you. I'm sure she's right."

Harry felt both sad and disgusted. "Yes, she is," he agreed. "That's exactly the kind of thing Skeeter would love. And what's worse, she'll write it so that it'll look like maybe it was something Pansy wanted to do, like she did in Ron's letter."

Ginny nodded. "Pansy said that, too. Skeeter is just so sickening, we all went on about that for a while. Anyway, Pansy said she wanted me to hear it from her, and also that it was better that I know because knowing has been a burden for you, one you couldn't talk about with me. She feels kind of bad now that she made you know, she's sure you'd rather not have known."

"That was my reaction at first, but I felt bad for having it. Maybe it is a burden, but I wasn't upset at her for telling me. If it made her feel better, then it was the least I could do. She did so much for me."

"Yes, she did. I was extremely grateful to her for doing it, of course, and I told her that. If it wasn't for her, you wouldn't be here right now, and my life would be infinitely worse. But I can really understand why she didn't want to tell Ron, to burden him with that. She said... I don't think she'll mind that I tell you this, but it's probably better if you don't mention it to Ron... she said that she was in kind of a hurry to do that sort of thing with Ron once they got together, and he was a bit surprised, that she was being so forward. Not that he was reluctant, she said."

"I can imagine," he said, smiling a little. "I assume she did it because she wanted to have a memory of that kind of thing which was actually pleasant."

"Yes, exactly. Let me ask you, you had to be the one to tell him, since she wasn't there when we got the letters. How did he take it?"

"Better than I expected," he said. "He wasn't mad at her, he just wondered why she didn't tell him. I think he kind of knew, though. I hadn't thought of it this way before, but the fact that he wasn't mad at her is kind of a compliment to

me, that he wouldn't question her reason for doing it. He must have seen it as something she had no choice about."

"She didn't, of course," said Ginny. "Hermione and I would have done it too, we both told her. Awful as it was, there just wasn't any real choice. And the idea of how Skeeter's going to write about it... it's like, I feel bad for everyone these days. For Pansy, for that... for Neville, for all he had to go through, both from her and from the Death Eaters... for you, for what will happen... and for Hermione, for just everything. This weighs on her so much. I don't think ten minutes goes by these days when she doesn't think about it. And the worst thing is, it's not going away. I mean, thanks to your getting that hair from Skeeter, she can't listen in anymore, but for as long as she lives, there'll be someone out there who won't pass up an opportunity to hurt Hermione or the rest of us, to make her or us look bad. No wonder Hermione wishes she were dead."

Concerned, he asked, "Do you think she really does? I mean, she said that thing about stepping on her, but I figured that was just because she was angry..."

She looked at him sadly. "Harry, Hermione's in a constant state of anger, of embarrassment, of frustration, right now. There's just a huge amount of emotional pressure on her. I think I could barely function if I was her. But yes, she does mean it. I know it's not good, she knows it's not good, she just can't help it. It's how she feels." She paused for a few seconds, thinking. "Right now, as we speak, she's sitting with McGonagall, telling her the story of what happened. She's told it twice already, and this'll be the hardest one. You know how she feels about McGonagall. Imagine if you'd had to tell a story like this about yourself to Albus, while he was still alive."

Harry could imagine it. "I just hope McGonagall will be as compassionate and understanding as he would have been."

"That's asking a lot of anybody," pointed out Ginny, "but I know what you mean. Yes, I hope she is, too."

They were silent for a few minutes, lost in their thoughts, eating the last of the cheese. Then Harry asked, "Did you ever get your O.W.L. results? I thought they usually came by the end of July."

"The O.W.L.s were delayed," she reminded him. He nodded somberly, remembering the reason, and the memories it stirred. "So, the results would be, too. But yes, it should be any day now."

They stopped talking as their food arrived. They talked only sporadically as they ate, discussing routine topics such as Hogwarts, Harry's schedule, and the fact that Harry would likely take only five N.E.W.T. exams. He joked that if he became the headmaster in the future, he would probably hold the record not only as the youngest headmaster, but also the one with the fewest N.E.W.T.s. She pointed out that if he remained until he was the same age as Dumbledore, it would be offset by another record, for the longest tenure as both headmaster and staff member.

After they finished, Wilmington came by and cleared away the dishes, then asked if they wanted any dessert. Both were full, but wanted to try something, so they settled on splitting one. Asked if they wanted coffee, they both decided to give it a try, never having had it before.

They ate their dessert slowly and talked. After they finished, she took his hand. Smiling, she asked, "Do you think we'll remember this night when we're old people?"

He chuckled. "If I don't, it'll mean that I've lost my memory, because it's definitely memorable. It's strange to think about being old, I'm barely used to being an adult."

"You should grow a beard, so you can look like Albus when you get to be that age," she joked.

"I don't know... I don't see myself as the type to have a beard, for some reason."

"I'm sure you'll be handsome whether you do or not," she assured him. "So tell me, when do you think we should get married?"

He reacted with surprise. "What made you think of that?"

She shrugged. "Thinking about us being old people, somehow that made me think of how many years we'd have been married at that point. Also, if tonight's memorable, then we should discuss something that'll be memorable."

"I don't know," he said. "But I haven't even asked you yet. I thought I'd, you know, get a ring, maybe get down on one knee like they do in the Muggle movies, that sort of thing."

"Hmmm, that sounds nice," she grinned. "But you don't really need to ask me to marry you, you know. You've already done that." To his slightly surprised look, she continued, "You did it when you said, 'I want us to get the Joining of Hands done.' That was your marriage proposal, even if you didn't realize it."

He smiled. "I guess so. Maybe I would have phrased it differently if I'd known. The way I said it doesn't sound very... I don't know, memorable."

She gripped his hand tightly. "Harry, you don't have to get down on one knee, or use a memorable phrase to make me happy. Like I said before, just be yourself. That's all I'll ever want from you."

Slightly embarrassed but very happy, he said, "I think I can do that." He paused, then added, "But I'll also try to remember to Vanish the furniture I conjure."

She smiled broadly. "That'd be good, too."

He felt a sudden impulse to kiss her, but she was across the table, and he felt awkward about moving enough to do it. He settled for giving her a loving look, which she returned.

Wilmington approached their table, holding a folder. Harry wondered if it was the bill, though it seemed too large to be that. "Professor Potter, Miss Weasley... The Golden Dragon has been in operation for over a century. There is a tradition which we have had for quite a long time, and we try to continue whenever possible. Normally, we do this only for married couples, but since you have already had the Joining done, we feel it safe to make an exception in your case."

He opened the folder, and handed Harry what at first he thought was a piece of paper. As Wilmington handed one to Ginny as well, Harry realized that it was a photo—a photo of his parents sitting at what was obviously a table at the Golden Dragon. As was usual in wizard photographs, the figures were smiling, moving, and occasionally waved at the camera. Harry saw his father at one point pat his stomach, obviously to indicate that he felt very full. He saw his mother laugh. He felt emotion rise up, and he looked up at Wilmington. "Thank you very much."

Wilmington's normal smile was gone; he looked sincerely pleased at Harry's reaction. "We had been hoping to see you

here," he said gently. Harry nodded his appreciation, and looked at Ginny's picture of Arthur and Molly as she looked at his. She again took his hand, knowing what he was feeling.

"And now," said Wilmington, "if you would be so kind, we would very much like to take a photograph of you, for... well, who knows?"

Ginny beamed. "We haven't thought of names yet, but we'd be very happy to." She and Harry moved closer to each other as another man came in, holding a camera. Suddenly, to Harry's great surprise, Fawkes burst into view a few feet above Wilmington's head, no doubt in full view of all the customers. He fluttered down and landed on Harry's shoulder.

Ginny looked at him in surprise. "Did he decide to do that, or did you ask him to?"

"I think he did," Harry replied, "but sometimes it's hard to tell. Maybe I would have wanted him in the picture, but I just hadn't thought of it. You know how it is, a lot of times he knows things I think before I do."

"Phoenixes are most impressive," commented Wilmington, "as are those with whom they bond." He gave a small smile and slight shrug of apology in response to Harry's embarrassed look.

Ginny smiled at Harry in a teasing way. "I'd definitely agree with that." He smiled back, and they faced the camera, hands held on top of the table. The man with the camera took a picture, then another. He thanked them, then withdrew. Harry leaned over and kissed Ginny. "You know, that kiss may show up in the picture," she said.

"By the time our children are old enough to see that picture, they'll have seen us do that a lot," he predicted. "They'll just say, 'that's Mum and Dad, even back then, they were always doing that.'"

"I see you plan on setting a good example for our children," she said happily.

"A very good one," he agreed. "Thank you, again," he said to Wilmington, as he and Ginny stood to leave.

"We are most pleased to have had you here," Wilmington assured them. "And as to the matter of the bill, Mr. Shackbolt, when he made the reservation, requested that it be sent to the Aurors. Thank you for coming. We hope you have enjoyed your evening."

"Very much, thank you," said Harry, as Ginny nodded in agreement. Wilmington shook hands with both of them, and they made their way to the exit. With Fawkes on his shoulder, Harry was aware of the eyes on him that he hadn't noticed when he had come in. As he stepped out into the cool evening air, a hand in Ginny's, he held up the photo for another look.

At nine-thirty, Harry stepped out of the Burrow's fireplace right behind Ginny to see everyone in the living room. They were greeted with smiles, as Pansy said, "Well, come on, we want to hear all about it." Harry looked for an empty chair, but before he could find one, the fireplace lit up again. To everyone's surprise, Kingsley stepped out.

"Hello, Kingsley," said Arthur, who then noticed Kingsley's expression, which was serious and grim. "What's going on? Did something happen, something about their dinner?"

"Something happened, but it was nothing to do with their dinner," answered Kingsley. "I have some... important news, something that happened while Harry and Ginny were at dinner. About an hour and a half ago Rita Skeeter was killed, at her home."

Harry was stunned, speechless; a look around showed that others were as well, especially Hermione. He had never seen her look so surprised.

"How?" asked Arthur.

"Whoever it was used the Killing Curse, then escaped by Disapparating and then taking a Portkey, in the same way that was done by the one who killed Fudge," said Kingsley. "And... there's another similarity to Fudge's murder: it appears that this killer used Polyjuice Potion as well."

Kingsley looked at Harry sympathetically; Harry felt a chill go down his spine without being sure why. "At seven forty-five, fifteen minutes after Harry and Ginny sat down to dinner, three witnesses saw someone approach, then enter, Skeeter's apartment. When later interviewed, they all said that who they saw was Harry. Whoever killed Skeeter assumed Harry's appearance before doing it."

Harry's mouth hung open. Even though he knew that he had not done it, he felt an irrational stab of guilt at the thought that someone who looked exactly like him had. "Why would they do that?" he asked, dumbfounded.

Solemnly, Kingsley replied, "I think there are going to be a lot of questions about this that we don't know the answers to, and many of them will begin with the word 'why.' Now, there's something we should all talk about, but before we do, I'm waiting for someone else to arrive. I sent a request for Hugo Brantell to come here; he should be here any time."

"Why did you call him?" asked Neville.

Kingsley looked around the room, meeting everyone's eyes. "Because this is kind of an uncomfortable situation for all of us, and there's a cloud looming that I'd like to get rid of as soon as possible. I'm sure it's occurred to all of us that Skeeter's death is rather... convenient for everyone here. The plain and simple fact is that the most logical suspects are in this room, and that includes me. Neville, Hermione, you remember that this afternoon, I said, 'Skeeter knowing this is unacceptable,' and three hours later she turns up dead. Now, I know that I didn't do it or have it done, and I don't think for a second that any of you did either. But before we proceed any further, I'd like us all to be comfortable with the idea that nobody wonders if anyone else had anything to do with it. Hugo can help us do that."

Harry looked at his friends, and he could tell they felt the same way as he did. "Kingsley, we trust each other, and we trust you. It's not necessary--"

"I know that, Harry, this is just for the sake of certainty," responded Kingsley. "And besides, how do you know it's not me? I'm the likeliest suspect, after all. I--"

"No, you're not," said Hermione quietly, still looking stunned.

Kingsley shook his head. "You're number two, Hermione, you're less likely than me. You were with McGonagall when it happened, and somehow I don't think you have connections to hit wizards. You have lots of motive, but no opportunity. I, on the other hand, happened to be alone at the time. I have an excellent motive, and I have opportunity. I've killed before, it's something I can do if I have to. I could have snuck up behind Harry when he was on ready status during

a shift and snipped a few hairs, he never would have known. Not only that, I could recite chapter and verse on why killing Skeeter was an excellent idea, one that I could entirely justify. She knew too many things, she could have endangered the whole anti-Voldemort movement. My moral qualms about killing wouldn't have stopped me if I thought it was really necessary.

"Now, it just so happens that I didn't, but I would be more comfortable if you all were certain of that. Having Hugo do this can stop even the stray thought from occurring to any of us, so-" He cut himself off as the fireplace lit up and Hugo stepped out.

He turned to Kingsley. "What's happened?"

Kingsley told him, then explained what he wanted from Hugo. Hugo's discomfort was plain. "Kingsley, I really don't like to use my talent this way. I'm not an investigator, and-"

"I'm not asking you to be one," Kingsley assured him. "As I said, this is just so we can all eliminate the thought. This is totally unofficial. Take in everyone here, and if anyone doesn't like the idea, then don't do it, you don't have to say who it is."

"I wouldn't anyway," responded Hugo. He surveyed the room for a few seconds, then sighed. "Nobody minds. Nobody thinks it'll change much; everyone's comfortable with the idea that nobody in the room knows anything."

"Okay," said Kingsley. "What questions do you need to ask?"

Hugo chuckled. "I don't need to ask. Everyone here is shocked, surprised, confused. If anyone knew anything that by telling would shed any light, it would appear to me like a brilliant beacon. Nobody here did it, nobody told anyone

they weren't supposed to tell, nobody has the first idea who did it."

"Okay, Hugo, thanks. But I wonder, would you be willing to stay around for a few minutes? You're pretty clever, I'd like to know what you think."

Hugo looked impatient. "Remember, this is strictly unofficial, but all right. But first, you ought to check me, too. I was one of the ones who knew."

"We can't check you," Kingsley pointed out.

"Harry can," said Hugo.

"Hugo—" started Harry, but he was quickly cut off.

"I know, Harry, you'd rather not. See, this is how I felt. But do it anyway, I'd like Kingsley to know for sure. This is important to him, he'd really like to know who did this."

Kingsley grunted. "So I can give them a kiss on the cheek."

"Okay, but I've never checked for lies before, just found memories," Harry said.

"It's not that different," said Hugo. "Just ask a question, and focus on the answer. If the person lies, you should get a glimpse of a memory that contradicts the lie. Try it with me, ask me some simple questions."

Harry nodded. "What color socks are you wearing?"

Hugo smiled. "Dark blue."

"Right. What did you eat for dinner?"

"Spaghetti."

"Hmmm... I'm getting an image of chicken, I think. Is that right?"

"Yes, very good," said Hugo. "Now ask a few conceptual questions, ones not associated with visual images."

Harry thought for a minute. "Do you like being a journalist?"

"Yes, I do."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-seven."

"I think that's a lie," said Harry. "It feels like you're remembering how old you are, but I didn't catch the number."

Hugo nodded. "As you get better at it, you will. But that should be enough for now. Go ahead and ask me the questions about this."

Harry took a deep breath, unhappy to be doing it. "Did you tell anyone about the situation with Hermione, or Skeeter's threats against us?"

"No," replied Hugo.

"Do you have any information which, if we knew, would help us figure out who did it?"

"No."

Harry nodded. "That should be enough, right?"

"Yes, Harry, thank you," said Kingsley. "Now, the next question is, who outside of this room knew about Skeeter's blackmail threat?"

"Only one person, Archibald Dentus," said Harry. To Kingsley's raised eyebrows, Harry added, "He's been a friend since the ARA passed, helping me with political stuff. But it couldn't have been him anyway, because of the Polyjuice Potion. Whoever did it needed a bit of me, and he's never had the opportunity to get that. Even if he told someone, they couldn't have impersonated me. Also, he only found out three hours before it happened, which would be hardly enough time to do anything."

"Okay, let's look at that part more closely," suggested Kingsley. "Aside from someone sneaking up on you and clipping hair, which is impossible for you to know, who could have had access to enough of you to make Polyjuice Potion?"

After a few seconds of silence, Harry had a sudden thought. "Voldemort... the night he came back. He had Wormtail take some of my blood to use in the cauldron, to bring him back."

"But he used it all, didn't he?" asked Ginny.

"There would still have been some blood left in the vial," Harry pointed out. "Would it have been enough to make Polyjuice Potion? Hermione?"

Looking distracted, Hermione returned her attention to the conversation. "Hmmm? Oh, yes, I think it would have been enough. All you need is a tiny bit."

"Would he have really kept the vial, though?" wondered Ron.

"It doesn't seem likely, but you never know," said Kingsley. "The fact is, the idea that the killer is a Death Eater is our default hypothesis, since it was done in the same way as it was with Fudge. You can construct a reasonable narrative around it: you can say they impersonated Harry because she

had just written an article about him, a largely favorable one, and she would've let him into her apartment. Even if they didn't know about your group's situation with Skeeter, which they wouldn't, it's still a reasonable device to get near her. It all works, except for motive."

"They could have wanted to implicate Harry," suggested Hugo. "That could be the primary reason for choosing him to impersonate. Of course, it doesn't work, because he can just take Veritaserum and he's off the hook. It could damage his reputation a bit, just the appearance of it... could that be worth it enough to them to bother?"

"They wouldn't even have to give me Veritaserum," Harry pointed out. "At least a couple dozen people saw me at the restaurant."

"That could have been an impostor, for all they know," said Kingsley.

Harry shook his head. "Fawkes showed up near the end of the meal. That's pretty good proof that it was me." A thought occurred to him. "You don't suppose that's why he showed up, do you?" he asked nobody in particular. "He somehow knew I had to be positively identified?"

Harry expected Hermione to answer, but Hugo did instead. "We do know that phoenixes often do things that turn out to be a good idea, even though they couldn't really have known at the time. It seems possible."

"Mentioning the restaurant brings up an interesting point," said Kingsley. "Harry hardly ever goes out in public these days, partly because he doesn't want to inconvenience us. Which I've been meaning to have a chat with him about," he added, giving Harry a stern but affectionate glance. "You really should get out more, it's good for you to be seen in

public. It emphasizes the idea that you're defying Voldemort. Anyway, the timing is pretty amazing: it happens just as Harry goes out for the first time in months. Either it was Death Eaters trying to implicate him, and they got really unlucky, or it was someone friendly trying to make sure he wasn't implicated. This brings us back to the idea that it was an Auror, or an Order member. But any competent Auror—and they all are—wouldn't have to impersonate Harry to get close to Skeeter; we're trained in how to infiltrate a home or building unseen by means other than Apparation. An ordinary apartment like Skeeter's would have been child's play for an Auror to get into. And the problem with it being a non-Auror Order member—like McGonagall, Snape, Lupin, and so on—is that they have no motive, since they didn't know that Skeeter was threatening to compromise classified information."

He paused, and there was silence for a minute. "It all keeps coming back to this," concluded Kingsley. "If it's not Death Eaters, the only people with motive are the ones who knew about Skeeter's blackmail threats. And those—"

He stopped talking as a face suddenly appeared in the fireplace; Harry looked over to see Dentus looking back at him, and everyone else. "Excuse me for intruding," he said, clearly surprised to see so many people. "I was calling for Harry, but it's not hard to guess what's going on. I just now heard what happened. Kingsley, Hugo, I gather you're the only people besides myself who knew about Skeeter?" They nodded. "Harry, the main reason I called was that I wanted to assure you that I told no one about our discussion, not even my wife. I knew you wouldn't think it anyway, but I wanted to tell you personally. I imagine that you're all trying to work it out, and not having much success?"

"No, we're not," agreed Harry. "And you're right, I didn't think you did, but I appreciate your calling to tell me that. We were just getting around to the idea that whoever did it didn't know about Skeeter's blackmail, even though it seems kind of unlikely."

"Indeed," said Dentus. "Very peculiar. Well, I'll let you get back to it, then. I'm not a very likely source of information for something like this, but I'll let you know if I hear anything. I'll be in touch." Dentus's head vanished from the fireplace.

Kingsley looked at Hugo. "I suppose you wouldn't tell me if I asked."

"No, I wouldn't," confirmed Hugo. "He didn't give his permission. But you're a smart man, Kingsley, you don't need me to tell you everything." Not understanding what they were talking about at first, Harry realized that Kingsley wanted Hugo to confirm Dentus's truthfulness, and Hugo didn't want to.

"I suppose not," Kingsley conceded. "Well, strange as it seems, the notion that Death Eaters did this has to be considered the most likely hypothesis, barring any new information. I'm heading back to headquarters, see if anything comes up in the search of her place, any kind of evidence. I doubt there will be, though." He said goodbye and left, followed soon by Hugo. Harry was alone with his friends, and Arthur and Molly.

Molly stood, followed by Arthur. "Well," said Arthur, "I guess this is one of those times when life is like a centaur. We're going to bed. Good night, all."

"Don't stay up too late," added Molly as she followed Arthur up the stairs, and the six were alone.

Harry looked at Hermione, who seemed to be staring at nothing in particular. "What does that mean, 'life is like a centaur?'"

Hermione continued staring, giving no indication that she heard Harry. He was about to try to get her attention when Pansy answered. "It's a phrase based on the idea that you can never get a straight answer out of a centaur, they're very mysterious and secretive. It kind of means, life has mysteries, sometimes you have no idea what's going on. It does seem true now."

Harry couldn't help but agree. There was silence for a minute, as everyone digested what had happened. He turned to Ginny and hesitantly said, "You know what this kind of reminds me of..."

"Percy," she said, and he nodded. "Yes, it's a very different situation, but I see the similarity. It's in the idea that we don't feel how we're 'supposed' to feel. In that situation, we were supposed to feel sad for ourselves, but we didn't, we just felt sad for Mum and Dad. Here, we're supposed to feel sad just on principle, even if only a little, but instead, we feel... well, not happy exactly, but..."

"Like she got what she deserved," put in Ron. "And relieved, that we don't have to go through what we thought we were going to have to. But, like with Percy, that isn't the 'acceptable' feeling, so we feel like we're... kind of stuck, somehow."

Pansy ran a hand over Ron's shoulders and upper back. "Like I said in the notebook to you that night, we feel what we feel. Considering what we've been through with her, I don't think anyone would blame us for not being sorry that she died."

Ginny took Harry's hand. "How do you feel?"

His first thought was that he wasn't sure he knew.

"Confused, I think. Like I'm in a fog, or something. I guess what Ron said makes sense. This thing that was hanging over me isn't anymore, and I'm happy about that, just not happy about the way it happened. What really disturbs me is the idea that somebody friendly did this to protect me. In a way, I find myself hoping it was Death Eaters. Also because then I don't have to think about how someone got a hair from me, or whatever."

"If somebody friendly did it, I don't think the reason would necessarily be to protect you," suggested Neville. "The fact that she knew stuff she shouldn't have was a far better reason. But I see what you mean. While all that was going on, I had this thought, like, what if it was retaliation for the letters? What if, for example, Cassandra was really mad at Skeeter for how the letters affected me, and... not that I thought she would actually do it, and then I remembered that she and Tonks were protecting Harry at the restaurant, so it couldn't have been her anyway. But I could definitely understand why you feel that way, Harry. I really didn't like the idea when I thought of it." Neville looked at Hermione, who again seemed to be staring off into space. He touched her cheek; slightly startled, she looked at him. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded slowly. "I feel like Harry said he felt, maybe even more so. Maybe it's a very thick fog. It's just... such a shock..."

Looking around at the others, Harry thought they were thinking the same thing as him—that this would have a stronger impact on Hermione than any of them. He had been in the most danger, but it was she who had carried by far the

greatest emotional burden. Now Skeeter was dead, something for which Hermione had actively wished. He wondered if she felt responsible, and he felt like he wanted to say something to her to assure her she wasn't, but he was afraid that if she wasn't thinking that, then his saying it would just cause her to do so.

They stayed downstairs for another half hour, talking in subdued tones, mostly covering ground already explored during the conversation with Kingsley and Hugo. Hermione said very little; Harry, only a bit more. Then they went upstairs, including Neville, who had moved his things over from his Auror guest room while Harry had been at the restaurant.

The boys wordlessly changed into their nightclothes and got into their beds. Harry lay in the silence for five minutes, his mind drifting. He thought about asking Fawkes to sing, but he didn't feel it was quite necessary. Then he had another thought, and made a request of Fawkes. Within a few seconds, he could faintly hear phoenix song coming from the girls' bedroom.

He felt his hand tingle, and rolled over in his bed so that his back was to Ron and Neville. He held up his left hand and looked into his palm. "That was very thoughtful of you," said Ginny. "I'm sure she appreciates it."

"It's just... hard to imagine what she's going through right now," he said, whispering so softly he could barely hear himself, but knowing she would hear it.

"I know what you mean," she agreed. "Our bedroom door is just open a crack, I think yours is too... why don't we open them completely, you three will be able to hear him better down the hall."

He agreed, got up, and walked to the door. Opening it all the way, he looked out into the hall and saw Ginny doing the same thing. On making eye contact, they immediately walked toward each other and kissed, with an unusual energy and urgency. He wasn't even sure why; he fleetingly wondered if it was a feeling of needing each other more in an emotionally charged situation. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too," she replied, the feeling as clear in her eyes as from her words. They kissed again, then went back to their rooms. Harry lay down and started his Occlumency exercises, phoenix song clearly audible through the open bedroom doors.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 7, The Memory Charm: Recovering from the Apparation crisis and the Skeeter problem, Harry and Hermione get another shock.

From Chapter 7: In the Hogwarts library Harry sat silently, dumbfounded. He looked at an astonished Hermione. "You saw it?" he asked.

Eyes wide, she nodded. "You should call Ginny, have Fawkes bring her. She needs to know this."

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

The Memory Charm

It was a beautiful, warm spring day, as it always was at the phoenix place in the middle of the night. Seeing Dumbledore standing a few feet away, Harry walked over and embraced him. "It's days like the one I just had that make me especially glad that I can see you like this," he said, then let go of Dumbledore.

"It has been a very trying day, a very trying week, for that matter," agreed Dumbledore. They sat down on the grass.

"Do you know who killed Skeeter?" asked Harry.

"Yes, I do, but it should not surprise you to learn that that is something I cannot tell you," said Dumbledore, in a tone suggesting he understood that Harry would not be happy with his answer. "You would like to know why. The short answer, to borrow a phrase, is 'that would be cheating.' The longer answer is that it would be a misuse of the connection we have. There are many things about the current physical situation that I could tell you which you would find useful and interesting, but to do so would be to deprive you of part of the normal experience of physical existence—to not know things, to have to find out for oneself. I tell you things here, but they are spiritual and philosophical ideas, not facts about physical existence. If I told you such things as you asked, it would change the experience of your life in a way that would make it less spiritually fulfilling. I understand that that is difficult for you to see at the moment, but I assure you that it is true. It is irregular enough that I do what

I do. As it is, I have changed your experience in one significant way: it will no longer be necessary for you to wonder about spirituality or post-death existence; those answers have already been given to you by me. I accept that because it, and talking to you, are decisions I made when I was physical. I should not go beyond what I planned to do when I went through the Veil."

Harry knew his disappointment would be clear to Dumbledore, even though he said nothing about it. "Well, like a lot of things you say about this sort of thing, I don't totally understand it, but I sort of do. I think the part I understood best was when you said, 'that would be cheating.' You've said before that life is kind of a big game, right?"

"That is a broad oversimplification, of course, but correct in concept," acknowledged Dumbledore. "It is a very important game, if you will, and one so absorbing and distracting that one is unaware of the fact that it is a game. It is not a game in the sense of a game being frivolous, or in the sense of being strictly for enjoyment. As I have said, our true nature is spiritual, and the most 'real' reality is the one I will reach when I move on from here, the spiritual realm. Consider the experience of reading a book, a particularly absorbing piece of fiction. There are times during which you become so absorbed that you temporarily forget it is a book; you imagine that it is real, a reality you are observing and perhaps feeling a part of. This is very roughly analogous to your whole physical existence as compared to your spiritual existence; your physical existence is like a very absorbing book in which from the first page to the last you do not recall that you are reading a book. For me to tell you things such as you asked would be like telling you how a book will end, or revealing major aspects of the plot in advance. The experience would be diminished."

"And so," said Harry, struggling to follow Dumbledore's point, "as it is, by talking to me like this, you're reminding me that I'm just reading a book, which I wouldn't have recognized otherwise."

"Yes, quite so, though I would not use the word 'just.' Physical existence is very important; without it, we would have no way of recognizing the true grandeur of our spiritual selves. One must 'not have' something before one can truly appreciate having it. Also, as I have said, we learn in physical existence things we could not learn in the spiritual realm."

Harry attempted to piece the idea together with things Dumbledore had said in previous nights. "So, is that the reason that when we're... physical, that we don't see the spiritual realm? It would be cheating?"

Dumbledore shrugged lightly. "Not cheating, exactly, but the experience would not be the same if we knew. You are familiar with the phrase 'the stakes are life and death.' The stakes of existence, as it were, would not be so high if it was commonly known and accepted that the spirit is eternal; it is part of what makes life interesting and challenging. The fact is that spiritual information is available in the physical realm, however; it is simply difficult to access, and very few do. The mystics with whom I consulted before I passed through the Veil understand such things; to them it is as clear as is physical reality. But they have devoted significant portions of their lives to understanding such things; most people do not. There will come a time-perhaps in the near future, perhaps in the distant future-when people know this as a matter of course, when children are raised to intuitively understand the spiritual realm and taught how to connect with it in their conscious awareness. That is part of the overall challenge for the human species, part of our society's

evolution. I understand that this does not concern you right now, but it is part of the 'big picture' that may help you understand my answer to your question."

Harry chuckled. "I've almost forgotten my question now, but I think I understand your point. I guess we're learning things, and that's one of the things we learn, we just haven't gotten to it yet."

"I see you are thinking of it as if it were part of a school curriculum," remarked Dumbledore, amused. "It is much less structured, of course, though the analogy is roughly correct. But let us return to the day's events, as I know you still have questions, and there is only so much time we should take each night."

Harry reluctantly nodded. "As you probably know, we were having a hard time last night because I think there's a part of each of us that was happy that Skeeter died. Or, happy for the result, I guess. If the result could have been gotten without her dying, I'm sure we'd all have preferred that. But I don't want to feel this way, I don't want to be even a little happy that she died. Is there some way that I, or we, can not feel this way?"

"Pansy was right, Harry. We feel what we feel. We can change how we feel about things, but it usually takes time, and understanding. To change how you feel about Rita's death, you must understand why you felt that way. For the most part, you do; you are happy not to have to face the trials you would have faced, and her death was the only way for those trials not to occur. But you already understand that it is not the fact of her death per se that pleases you; in your guilt, you fail to differentiate between being pleased at her death, and pleased at the result of her death. You feel guilty because you find any satisfaction at all with the results of

her death, even though it is very understandable that you do so. Had she been killed along with Cornelius, as was intended, you would not have felt happy in the least. You know what kind of person you are, and that you take no satisfaction from another's death."

"I suppose that makes sense," Harry agreed. "I do understand that I'm happy with the result, not her death exactly. But when I say 'us,' I suppose I'm mainly thinking of Hermione. I'm concerned about her. I remember what you said about Ron wishing Umbridge was dead, but... in this case, Hermione wished Skeeter was dead, and she actually died. I'm worried that Hermione might feel responsible somehow."

"It is understandable that she would," said Dumbledore. "In the strictest sense, she is not, as she did not kill Rita herself, or commission her killing. She is responsible only for her own thoughts and actions. She avidly wished Rita dead, and for that, she does bear responsibility."

"Maybe, but she was pushed so hard emotionally that you could say that she was barely in her right mind," Harry argued. "That's not the way she usually is, and I would never blame her for that."

"It is not a question of blame, or of fault. My intent is not to judge Hermione's actions or thoughts; my saying that she bears responsibility for her thoughts and actions was a statement of fact. No one else can judge us; it is only we who can truly judge ourselves."

"I remember when this topic came up, about Ron and Umbridge, you said..." Harry paused, trying to remember Dumbledore's exact words, "'The line between wishing someone dead and actually killing them is far thinner than

most people would like to believe.' Can you explain what you meant by that, how that works?"

"Our thoughts are highly creative, far more so than is commonly understood in the physical realm," said Dumbledore. "In the spiritual realm, our thoughts are instantly creative: if you think of something, it appears. In this in-between realm which I inhabit, it is a similar situation: this place seems real to you, and in a way it is—you can pick flowers, you can feel the sunlight—but we are creating it, you and I, with our thoughts. Our dreams are no less valid or real than our waking existence, and they are created totally from thoughts. Even in the physical realm, there is magic, which is simply a way of making our thoughts physically manifest. You may recall that in the first lecture I gave to your class last year, I emphasized the primacy of thoughts over words in performing magic; these are all variations on a theme.

"The 'bottom line,' if you will, is that in the physical realm, our thoughts are essentially creating our reality; this is a collective endeavor. This is not something I can explain fully right now, as it would take quite a long time, and is not truly necessary. For now, you may take my word for it if you wish. This does not happen at a conscious level, in the sense that things do not appear or occur instantly just because we think them. At the physical level, it takes some time, if one is not using magic."

Harry took a minute to digest what Dumbledore had said. It didn't sound right, but as usual, he was inclined to take it seriously if only because Dumbledore said it. He decided to operate on the assumption that what Dumbledore said was true. "So, if Hermione hadn't wanted Skeeter dead, would Skeeter not have died?"

"We cannot say for certain, since in this case that is not what happened, though I do believe that it is almost certain that she would have died anyway. Each situation is different. Ron at one point wished Dolores Umbridge dead, but she is still alive. Wishing for it does not make it directly happen, but it contributes to the environment, in a sense. As greater numbers of people desire and focus on an event, the chances of it happening increase. With her actions, Rita herself contributed greatly to the atmosphere in which her death took place. She deliberately inflicted emotional wounds on all of you, especially Hermione and Neville, and she threatened actions which could have contributed to the destruction of the wizarding community. She has substantial culpability in the events that occurred, far more than does Hermione."

"Yes, but Hermione might say, 'But she only did that because I made her stop writing. If I hadn't done that, none of this would have happened,'" pointed out Harry.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Hermione did not make Rita do what she did. We may feel that we are provoked into actions, but we choose them. We cannot blame anyone else for our thoughts or actions. Of course, what Hermione did affected Rita's life substantially, but Rita could have done a number of things, all far more constructive than what she did. We may understand the reasons she sought revenge, but she is still ultimately responsible for her actions. One of the great Muggle prophets advocated 'turning the other cheek,' and this is why. If we do not, we may be drawn into cycles of harm, pain, and retaliation. Hermione already realizes that she stopped Rita from writing out of revenge, to harm her as Hermione herself felt harmed. She is in the process of recognizing the full consequences of wishing Rita's death as she did, and entertaining the notion of causing it directly. As she indicated at one point, there were times at which if she

had seen a beetle, she might well have stepped on it, not knowing for certain whether it was Rita. She could not seriously entertain killing Rita as a human, but killing a 'bug' was sufficiently different to her that she could perhaps have done it. Obviously she was under enormous emotional stress, which is important for her to keep in mind as she considers the situation. Hermione is suffering greatly now because she intuitively understands that though she did not kill Rita, what she desired is morally the same thing. It is simply being brought home to her in a much stronger fashion, since Rita did die soon after Hermione wished it, and since she and the rest of you avoid harm as a result of her death.

"Consider the end of your third year at Hogwarts, your first meeting with Sirius. You thought at that time that he had killed your parents, and your rage was sufficient that you seriously considered killing him. Now, the fact is that you could not have, as you did not know the Killing Curse; you thought you could simply point your wand at him, wish him dead, and it would happen. You did not in fact do so, but if you had, you would have been morally culpable of murder despite not actually having killed. The intent is more important than the action, since random events can change the outcome of the action. You understand this; you discussed with Ginny and Severus the question of whether in preventing Rita from writing Hermione was motivated by revenge or protectiveness. You felt that her intent was important, and it is."

Harry looked down sadly as it started to sink in just how difficult this would be for Hermione, hard enough as the past few days had been already. "Is there anything I can say to her that will help, make her feel less responsible?"

"You only can if she blames herself for things that were not her responsibility," advised Dumbledore. "You can remind her of your unconditional love and support, as can the others. Beyond that, this is a process that she must go through. She will want to change this about herself, and you can encourage her. There are similarities to what you went through after Hogsmeade, though in that case you bore no moral responsibility. You had to go through your grief, and there was little your friends could do for you, much as they wanted to. That will be the case with Hermione as well. There are also similarities to what you and Neville have been through, when you used the Cruciatus Curse. She did have more opportunity for reflection than did you or Neville, but she too was under nearly unbearable stress, and she must consider this as she evaluates her actions and thoughts. You can remind her of this.

"There is one other thing you can do: you may show her your memories of this conversation. It will be painful for her, but it is pain that she will go through sooner or later, and the sooner she goes through it, the less she will suffer. It is her choice, of course; she must deal with this in her own time and fashion.

"We should finish here for the night, as we are approaching the point beyond which I do not wish to deprive you of sleep. We will talk again tomorrow night." Harry nodded, and was asleep again.

He woke up and looked around to see that Ron and Neville had already awoken and left the room. A look at the clock showed that the time was seven-ten, which meant that he had gotten enough sleep, despite the conversation with Dumbledore. He got up and closed the door so he could change into his day clothes.

A half a minute later, there was a knock on the door. "Just a minute," he said, as he finished putting on a shirt. "Okay, come in."

Hermione opened the door and entered the room, looking haggard and sleep-deprived. "Did you get much sleep?" asked Harry.

"About four hours, I think," she replied. "I'm very sure I wouldn't have gotten any at all if it hadn't been for Fawkes. I wanted to thank him, and to thank you."

He shrugged lightly to indicate that Fawkes had been the one to actually do what she was thanking him for. "You know I would do anything I could for you."

She nodded. "I know. Did you talk to Albus last night?" At his nod, she continued, "Did he say anything about my situation?"

He nodded again. "It was the main topic. He said I could show you, if you wanted to see it. It doesn't have to be now, of course, it could be anytime you're ready."

"No, I'd rather do it now, or else I'm just going to spend all my time wondering what he said." Harry pulled out the Pensieve and put in his memories as they sat on his bed. He decided to join her in watching it in case she had any comments or questions. She didn't, and they watched in silence. She was expressionless throughout the viewing.

They exited the Pensieve, and her face still showed no emotion for a few seconds. Then she suddenly started crying, and buried her head in Harry's shoulder. He held her as she cried harder; he was reminded of how he felt after Hogsmeade, how he had cried longer and harder than he ever had before. Reaching for his wand, he soundproofed the

door to remove the chance she would be heard downstairs, then put down his wand and held her tightly again. He said nothing, trying to convey his support through how he held her.

She cried for a long time; maybe five minutes, he thought. She finally stopped, and stayed in his embrace as she recovered. As she disengaged from him, he looked around for a box of tissues, but couldn't see any. She pulled a package from a pants pocket. "I always carry one of these. I have to, you know how often I cry." He smiled sadly.

Recovering her composure, she said, "He was right, of course, about pretty much everything. I'd never heard the part about how thoughts are so important, but I understood what he meant. I felt like I was in denial last night about her death, which I guess is why I didn't react more then. I think I knew I had to face this kind of thing, and I didn't want to."

She gave him a very serious look, one that communicated just how much she trusted him. "What made it worse, and what he either didn't know or didn't say, is that when Kingsley said she was dead, my first reaction was one of triumph, of satisfaction. I mean, I was stunned, like we all were, but I know some part of me felt that way. It didn't take me long to feel ashamed of that, of course, but I knew I still felt that way. I just tried not to think about it. Then I got into bed and started thinking about it. I think I was about to start crying when Fawkes appeared and started singing. Then I cried a little, just because it was such a nice thing for you to have done, and it reminded me that I have friends who love me. Then I felt undeserving of that, because of what I had done, I must be an awful person, the rest of you wouldn't have suffered like you did if not for me... it was so hard not to think things like that. I tried really hard to concentrate on the song, it helped a lot."

"I'm really glad." Remembering what Dumbledore had said near the end of the talk about supporting her, he said, "I'll always love you, Hermione, we all will. That wouldn't change even if you had actually killed her."

He could see her appreciation in her eyes. "I'm glad you say that, because it really is as if I did. He was right, it is morally equivalent. I know, I know what you're going to say, I was under terrible pressure, and it's not that different from what you and Neville did. In a way it's not as bad, because unlike you and Neville, what I did had no direct result. But in a way it's worse, because I had an opportunity for reflection that you and Neville didn't, and I reacted with violent thoughts and desires anyway. I really think I would have done it, Harry. If I'd seen a beetle, I would have stepped on it. I was that far gone."

"It's still not that different from Neville or I," he argued. "I'm not sure I wouldn't have killed Lestrage if I thought I could've, and Neville's intent was to make her go mad, which is a lot like murder. And I'm not sure I'd say you had much opportunity for reflection. It was like you were being, I don't know, mentally tortured. How much rational reflection can you do, with what was being done to you? You can't excuse Neville and I for what we did without excusing yourself too."

She smiled a little. "Albus said you should remind me of that, and you did." She sighed, then continued, "I know that's true, at least part of me does. He was also right that in some ways this would be for me like what Hogsmeade was for you, something I have to get through, and something that no amount of rational thinking is going to help. I'm pretty sure I'll never wish anyone dead again. At least I hope so, but I suppose I can't know for certain until something like this happens again, which I really hope it doesn't."

"You won't," he said, feeling sure it was true. "You'll remember how this felt, and you'll react differently."

She gave him a look that told him that she appreciated his support and hoped it was true, but still wasn't convinced. "Come on, let's go get some breakfast," she suggested. He agreed, and they headed downstairs. He hoped she would feel better soon, but he knew it could take some time.

* * * * *

Later that afternoon, Harry walked into Snape's office and sat down. Saying nothing, he looked up at Snape, his expression conveying to Snape that he could begin any time he wanted. Snape raised an eyebrow. "Not even a comment about the weather?"

Despite not being sure whether he was being teased, mocked, or something in between, Harry found that he couldn't help but smile at Snape's remark. He wondered if Snape's sense of humor was growing on him. At the same time, it occurred to him that Snape's more usual sense of humor included far more cutting remarks, and Harry understood that Snape was on his best behavior for him, so any joke Snape made was bound to be a mild one. Part of his adjustment to this, thought Harry. He's treating me in some ways as he would have treated Albus; even though I'm not Albus, I'm doing what he did.

"I guess I'm kind of preoccupied today," said Harry. "A lot's been happening recently. I assume you heard about what happened to Skeeter."

"Of course," Snape replied, and offered no further comment. He took out his wand and started viewing memories. To Harry's mild surprise, he again viewed recent events, starting with Hugo's visit on Thursday morning, continuing

with Hermione's account of her and Neville's meeting with Kingsley on Friday, her and Harry's meeting with Dentus, Harry's dinner with Ginny and the rest of the evening, his conversation with Dumbledore while he slept, and finally, his conversation with Hermione in the morning. The session took an hour and a half, a little longer than usual.

"Let me ask you something," said Snape upon finishing. "For the sake of discussion, let us suppose that last night when Mr. Shacklebolt visited you, he had informed you that it was he who had killed Skeeter, and given as reasons the same ones he enumerated when explaining that he was a logical suspect. What would your reaction have been?"

Harry raised his eyebrows; it would never have occurred to him to wonder such a thing. "I don't know... I guess I would have been upset. I wouldn't have wanted him to do that. I don't think there are any circumstances where I could approve of cold-blooded murder. There would have to be other possibilities, like Memory Charms, other ways to deal with her knowing things she wasn't supposed to know."

Snape looked at Harry disdainfully, as if he had expected better from him. "Memory Charms can be broken, as you know perfectly well, and there is no one as skilled at breaking them as the Dark Lord. You might argue that the chances that the Dark Lord would ever discover that she had such information are quite small, and it is possible that that is true. But when even such small chances are weighed against the consequences of their occurrence, they must be taken very seriously.

"In addition, Skeeter was obviously a substantial risk for other reasons. Mr. Brantell's assurances that she was bluffing notwithstanding, her hatred of Miss Granger could very well have driven her to change her mind about revealing such

information. Skeeter also threatened to reveal our relationship, and since Miss Granger was forced to edit the memory from what Mr. Brantell saw, he was unable to offer an opinion as to her veracity. She may well have been serious. This is something that Mr. Shacklebolt of course could not know and take into consideration in his decision, but you should, in your evaluation of such a hypothetical action on Mr. Shacklebolt's part."

"And revealing that would cost us you as a spy," Harry acknowledged. "I do understand that... it's just a moral thing, I guess. I just don't think I could accept it, no matter what the circumstances. I mean, I stopped Remus and Sirius from killing Pettigrew, and he was responsible for my parents being killed."

"Yes, and look at the result of that action," said Snape, still polite but becoming somewhat emotional in making his argument. "He escaped, and helped the Dark Lord rise again. Many have died at his hands already, and more certainly will. Was the cost of saving that one life, the man who betrayed your parents, really worth that?"

Harry felt anger rise up, as it seemed to him that Snape was blaming him for all the deaths caused by Voldemort since that time. He understood the causal connection, but had thought about morality and blame enough over the past year to know that he was to blame only for his own actions, not those of anyone else. "I did the right thing," he replied, trying to keep his anger under control. "He was supposed to be taken into custody, to go to Azkaban. It wasn't my fault he escaped."

Snape relentlessly pressed his argument; Harry wondered if Snape was ignoring Harry's clear though subdued emotional reaction. "It must always be assumed that any prisoner

could escape at any time. You were thirteen, and this clearly did not occur to you. What concerns me is that you would probably make the same decision today, even knowing the potential consequences."

"Yes, I would," agreed Harry. "And Albus would agree. He approved of what I did with Pettigrew."

Snape sighed. "The headmaster was not perfect, as he himself said many times. This attitude, this moral absolutism, was the trait of his which I most feared would cost our cause dearly, and it almost did. You no doubt recall that had I not searched Malfoy's belongings in January in violation of the headmaster's wishes, you would be dead, and our cause gravely wounded. I strongly feel this attitude was an indulgence on his part, and now on yours. Is it really a greater good to take the chance of hundreds or thousands dying, so that you do not have one death on your conscience? Is your conscience sufficiently salved by the knowledge that you did not personally inflict those thousands of deaths, even though your actions foreseeably allowed them to occur?"

Harry was silent. He could see Snape's point, but he didn't think he could bring himself to approve of killing anyone. As he thought, Snape spoke again. "I do not hope to persuade you, Professor, of the correctness of my position. Your attitude is based in part on notions of conscience and morality, neither of which I can competently address. But I would strongly urge you to discuss this matter with both the headmistress and Mr. Shacklebolt. Both have actual experience in dealing with this kind of situation, and clearly understand the stakes involved." Snape paused. Harry saw on Snape's face a rare expression: Snape looked serious and earnest, and was doing his best to control whatever emotion he felt. "I brought up this topic not to anger or provoke you,

Professor. I brought it up because I am deeply concerned. I can easily imagine a situation in which you may make a decision which you feel is morally correct, but ends up costing us our chance to defeat the Dark Lord. You understand, as well as is possible for you, what I endure to contribute to this cause. You may then understand why I am very disturbed at the possibility that such a chance could be squandered. I do not want what I have done to be for nothing."

Harry stared straight ahead, deeply conflicted. He was very affected by what Snape had said; it had seemed, in its own way, to be as much a personal plea as a reasoned argument. Harry realized that Snape was essentially asking him to look at the situation from Snape's point of view. Doing so, Harry found he could easily understand why it was so important to Snape, and why he found Harry's attitude so frustrating, even though it was much the same as Dumbledore's had been.

"I understand," said Harry. "I'll think about it."

Snape nodded, clearly having expected nothing more. "The headmistress wished me to ask you to see her after you were finished here." Harry nodded and left, more preoccupied than when he came in.

Sitting with his five friends in the Burrow living room shortly after returning from Hogwarts, Harry finished his account of his conversation with Snape. He had considered talking about it only with Ginny and Hermione, but decided that he could tell the rest provided that he made no references to the nature of his relationship with Snape. The others knew he spent time with Snape anyway, so it would not be a surprise that he had conversations with him.

"So, I feel like I have to take what he said very seriously," said Harry. "Of course I can't tell you three exactly what it is that makes what he does to help the Order so difficult. I will say that while I said that what I do to help him isn't easy, it's a lot less difficult than what he does. He has a good reason not to want what he does to go to waste."

"But you were right, it wasn't your fault that Pettigrew escaped," argued Ron, "and I don't think it was exactly foreseeable that he would help Voldemort come back. After all, plenty of Death Eaters were free all along, and they hadn't found him or brought him back."

"Well, yes and no," said Harry. "Remember, earlier that day in Divination, I'd gotten that prophecy about the Dark Lord's servant returning to him. If I'd thought about that, which at the time I didn't, I could have foreseen that it referred to Pettigrew. Anyway, though, I think he was talking more about some future situation when he used the word 'foreseeable.' And I think he knows that I'm not really capable of killing, so it would have to be a situation like Pettigrew, where I stopped someone from being killed. It could be the case that they had information that could really hurt the Order, and because of me they were captured instead of killed, and later escaped. Something like that, I guess."

"It's hard to imagine a specific situation," said Pansy, "but I kind of see his point. It's hard to imagine you approving of murder. But what if by killing, or allowing the killing of, one Death Eater, you save twenty innocent people?"

Harry nodded. "Albus's attitude about that was, you're responsible for what you do, not for what others do. You have to do what you think is right, and killing is wrong, period. Snape's attitude is that if you reasonably knew or could

guess that this person would kill, and you fail to stop it, then you have some responsibility. I can see both points, and I'm just not sure where I would stand. I feel like the threat to those twenty people would have to be really clear before I could seriously consider approving someone being killed."

"I'm sorry to ask this," said Ron, "but keeping in mind that Death Eaters have escaped before and might again, what if it was some powerful Death Eater who had vowed to kill Ginny as soon as he got the chance?"

Harry looked down, then at Ginny. Her face told him that she wouldn't want him to do something that would cause him to suffer, for her sake. He found, however, that that didn't affect his answer. "It's a good question. I guess from a strict moral point of view, it shouldn't matter whether it's Ginny or not, but of course it does. I can't say for sure, but I know I would very seriously consider it. I might do it. And I know that if I do it for her, I should do it for others, because those people who might get killed have loved ones like I have Ginny." He paused, thinking. "Albus was an absolutist, and I think he would have accepted that kind of risk to his wife, even, rather than kill or approve of killing. I know I feel a lot like he did, but I don't think I can be an absolutist about it. Not considering how scared I already am of something happening to Ginny, or the rest of you, for that matter."

Ginny pulled Harry closer to her, hugging him around his shoulders from behind. "I would want you to do what you thought was right, but I do understand how you feel. I know there's nothing I wouldn't do to make sure you were safe, whether it was moral or not."

"Did you talk to McGonagall about this?" asked Neville.
"What did she say?"

Harry's small shrug indicated that it hadn't been that helpful. "She said basically the same thing as Albus did when I was trying to decide whether or not to support the ARA, that it's a matter of judgment and we have to do what we think is right, that there are no right-or-wrong, black-or-white answers. I asked her if she could condone killing Skeeter, and she said she thought it was a difficult choice; she agreed with Kingsley that you could make a good case for it, but she would want more information and to talk to her personally before making that kind of decision. She said that if she had known the situation, she would have visited Skeeter at her home with someone like Hugo, or a very skilled Legilimens, or made her drink Veritaserum. Then she would have asked questions about what Skeeter intended to reveal, or under what circumstances she would reveal anything. What McGonagall would do next would depend on the answers she got. That way, if she did agree to have Skeeter killed, at least she would be personally certain that it was absolutely necessary. Even then, she said, she knew her conscience would disturb her quite a lot. But she said that she's willing to have that on her conscience if necessary, considering what's at stake."

Everyone was silent, taking in what Harry had said. Finally Ron said, "It's funny, halfway through that I was thinking, 'wow, what she's talking about is really illegal,' but then it occurred to me that that kind of thing isn't so important compared to defeating or losing to Voldemort."

Hermione spoke, Harry noticed, for the first time in the conversation. Usually she would be an active participant, but Harry guessed that as the topic was whether murder was justified in any circumstances, she may have felt it was too close emotionally to what she was going through.

"Governments do that all the time, both wizard and Muggle, when their security interests are at stake. And McGonagall

has lives in her hands now, the same way Albus did. Do you know, Harry, if she's now the leader of the Order?"

"From the way she talked, I think it's not just her, but her and Kingsley. Officially, of course, it's the Ministry and the Aurors who are supposed to be making decisions like that, but the Order has been leading the fight for so long now that they have a much better organization. Also, Snape's intelligence goes to the Order, not to the Ministry."

"From her saying that, I would think it was possible that Skeeter was killed by someone in the Order," said Ron, "but the problem is that they didn't know that Skeeter knew what she knew. Unless they did know, but somehow in a way different than we did."

"I suppose we can't know that," agreed Harry, "but right now I'm inclined to think what Kingsley said that night is true, that it was just Death Eaters finishing the job they started, and it's just coincidence that they..." He shrugged lightly, embarrassed. "I was going to say 'did us a favor,' which sounds terrible, but you know what I mean."

"It also occurred to me," added Neville, "that they might have killed her for a similar reason that they killed Fudge. I guess they killed Fudge just to scare the Ministry, to tell them that none of them are safe, and they shouldn't do things like the ARA if they don't want to get killed. Remember, when Skeeter was killed, she had just recently written that article about Harry's childhood. Even though we know Harry didn't like it and didn't want it to be written, it made Harry look good. Maybe they killed her to let people know that 'if we try to kill you once and fail, we'll try again,' and as a message to journalists not to write nice things about Harry, and to make them nervous about writing anti-Voldemort stuff."

Harry nodded. "It makes sense. Anybody who does anything they don't like is going to be a possible target. We've always heard about what it was like sixteen years ago, the atmosphere of fear, of terror. It seems like they're trying to do that again."

There was another silence at that thought. Then Ginny asked, "Did you talk to her about anything else?"

"Well, it was more like she talked to me, but yes. She gave me a lecture, reprimanding me for not telling her about Skeeter's threats right away—"

"I told her that was my fault," interjected Hermione. "When I told her the story last night, she said that, and I told her that that was what I wanted, that it wasn't your idea."

"She did say that you told her that, but she said that I should have insisted that we tell her. The lecture was about how important it is for the Order leadership to have all necessary information as soon as possible, and we need to tell her right away if we find out something that we know would interest them, or could be a security issue. I can see that she's right, I guess we all thought of it more as a personal thing. She also said I still need to decide on the fifth-year prefects, the Quidditch brooms thing, and how or if I'm going to teach the energy of love."

Ron and Ginny started speaking at exactly the same time, stopped, and gestured for each other to proceed. Ron persisted, and Ginny asked her question first. "Are you going to? Have you decided what you're going to do about that?"

"No, I'm not sure what I'm going to do yet. I'm kind of leaning toward not doing it yet, maybe starting it in classes next year, not this year. I mean, we do know that it can be taught, but we know so little about it. Considering how

difficult it is to do, and how... unusual the way of doing it is, I don't know if I want to try to teach it to three hundred people right away. Some people may not even want to do it when they find out what it involves."

"They'll want to, Harry," said Neville. "For a shield against the Killing Curse?"

"I think parents will want their children to do it," suggested Hermione, "but as we know, the students themselves will have to want it pretty badly. I'm not sure how badly they'll feel they need that shield, especially at age eleven. But let me ask you something. When we had that conversation with McGonagall the night Albus died, you said you would probably teach it in your classes this year, that you couldn't think of any reason not to. What made you change your mind?"

Harry looked at Ron and said, "A few things... one was your experience. I mean, you're seventeen, close friends with all of us, highly motivated, and in love, but you still might not have been able to get it if I hadn't gone poking around in your mind. Most students will be younger, and most won't be in love, even if they have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Yes, most will have friends and be motivated, but probably not as much as you were. I just feel like it's going to be a huge challenge for them, and I can't do Legilimens on them like I did with you, since I think a lot of parents wouldn't approve even if the kids said it was okay. I just think what happened with you made me realize that there's a lot we don't know about it. People are going to be disappointed if they try all year and don't have it by the end of the year. You all got it, but maybe the next step is to try it with adults, people who I don't know quite so well. Doing it with the Aurors, like Kingsley asked, will be a good next step."

"Couldn't you do it with, say, just one class as a test, and see how that goes?" suggested Ginny.

Hermione responded, "The problem with that is, how does he pick the class? I mean, if he picked his Slytherin and Gryffindor firsts, I guess they'll be second years soon, people would think it was favoritism, like he liked them better. It could be seen that way with whatever class he did it with. The other classes would say, 'why not us?'" But one thing you could do, Harry, is think about trying it with the seventh years as an experiment. If anyone said it was favoritism, you could say that this is their last chance to learn it before they graduate, which would be true. You would also have Neville, Ron, Pansy, and I to help you, if you wanted."

"That's an interesting thought," said Harry. "I'll think about that. Of course, everyone would have to agree. If even one person didn't want to, I'm not sure I'd be comfortable doing it."

"Why?" asked Ron. "People might not necessarily like any particular thing in a class, and teachers teach it anyway. You're the teacher, you decide what the curriculum is. You can't make them want to, and I know it won't work for them if they don't want to, but is it fair to the ninety percent who want to do it, if you don't do it because of the other ten percent?"

Harry could see Ron's point, but he didn't like the idea of spending a lot of class time on something that some people would definitely not use. "Well, like I said, I'll think about it. I'll probably talk about it in the first class, see what people say, how strongly they feel. So, what were you going to ask, Ron?"

"I wanted to know what you were going to do about the Quidditch brooms thing," said Ron, his expression suggesting that he was hoping for a particular answer.

"I think I'm going to say yes, I'll agree with Flitwick and Sprout. I know it wouldn't exactly benefit us this year, but I have to think about the future. Besides, Snape will never agree anyway, so it won't matter. But even if he did, well, I still think we could win the Cup with brooms that were no better than anyone else's."

Ron looked unhappy, though not upset. "I guess I understand, though it'd be sad to have two Firebolts and not use them. But you're right, Snape won't agree, so I shouldn't worry about it."

"I have a question, Harry," said Pansy. "Well, for you and Ginny, really. We never did get to hear what happened at the Golden Dragon last night."

Harry and Ginny started to tell the story together. It occurred to Harry that so much had happened since then, it seemed as though the dinner had been longer ago than it really was.

After dinner that night, Harry met with Kingsley and two other Aurors, and they Apparated to Privet Drive to fulfill their promise to the Dursleys to protect their house from Apparation. Harry wondered whether the Dursleys would say anything to him about the article, but fortunately, it wasn't necessary for him to go into the house, and they didn't come out. It took him a little under two hours. Ginny had offered to come with him and keep him company, but he had declined; towards the end of the two hours, he found himself wishing he had taken her up on it.

The next morning, soon after breakfast, Molly announced that she wanted the house cleared. She wouldn't say what

she was doing, just that she needed for nobody else to be in the house for a few hours. Harry and Ginny exchanged a smile, knowing where they would go to spend the time. He wondered what Molly was doing, but he found that he didn't wonder for long.

Three hours later, at eleven o'clock, Fawkes deposited them in the Burrow living room. They sat down on the sofa, and a minute later, Hermione came through the fireplace, followed by Neville. To Harry's surprise, and obviously Neville's, Hermione asked Neville to sit on the sofa. He did so, then she asked Harry and Neville to close their eyes for a few seconds.

"That seems like a very odd thing to want us to do," said Harry. "Why in the world—"

"There's a spell I've been learning, it'll make the room look different," explained Hermione impatiently. "I don't want you to see it while it's happening, I just want you to see what it looks like afterwards. Just humor me, okay?"

Harry and Neville exchanged a glance and a shrug, and closed their eyes. Harry wondered why Hermione hadn't asked Ginny to close her eyes too; as he was about to open his mouth to ask, Hermione spoke again. "Okay, you can open your eyes now."

Harry did, and gave a sudden start as he saw about fifteen or twenty people who hadn't been there a few seconds ago. "Happy Birthday!" they shouted, as his face registered his astonishment. Hermione sat down next to an equally surprised Neville, and Ginny did next to Harry.

"You didn't think we were going to let your seventeenth birthdays go by without any celebration, did you?" asked a

smiling Hermione. She kissed Neville as Ginny kissed Harry, and the guests clapped and cheered.

Harry and Neville still hadn't quite recovered from their shock. "How did..." Neville began, then trailed off.

"You remember I was gone for a few hours yesterday," Hermione said. "Kingsley was nice enough to take some time to teach me how to Disillusion people and make them reappear again. Thank you, everyone, for standing so still. See, you might have seen them if they'd moved. Anyway, this is a birthday party for the both of you. I'd hoped to have one closer to your birthdays, but the Apparation crisis kind of put that on hold. Today seemed like a good day. So, happy birthday."

Harry finally smiled. "That's really nice, Hermione, thank you. And thank you, everyone, for coming."

"Well, Ginny helped," pointed out Hermione.

"Just inviting people, it was your idea," responded Ginny.

"Well, you two can go off and argue about it," joked Pansy. "We'll just go ahead and have the party."

Harry stood and started walking among the people, thanking them individually for coming. He saw most of the people from Hogwarts he liked and was friendly with. He greeted Dean, Seamus, Parvati, and Lavender, then moved on to a group of Hufflepuffs: Justin, Ernie, Hannah, and Susan Bones. He noted that most of the people present had been in the D.A. He also saw Cho, Luna, and Justin's brother, David. Moving on, he saw all three Creeveys, and greeted them warmly. "Hi, Colin, Dennis, Andrea, thanks for coming."

"Well, it was nice of Ginny to invite us," responded Colin.
"Not much chance we'd turn it down."

"Happy birthday, Professor," chirped Andrea excitedly.

"Thanks, Andrea, but you can call me Harry here," replied Harry, as Colin and Dennis exchanged amused smiles.

She looked doubtful. "It just seems strange, because I've always called you 'Professor.' They knew you before you were a professor, so it's not so strange for them."

"I don't feel so much like a professor right now," said Harry.
"Just a normal seventeen-year-old, I suppose." Looking around, he added, "It's nice, really, this is the first birthday party I've ever had."

The Creeveys' expressions became somber. "We read the article, of course," said Dennis. "We really felt bad for you. We know you told Colin and I a bit about it, of course, but..."

"It wasn't as bad as she made it sound," said Harry, definitely feeling as though he didn't want to be pitied.
"Okay, it wasn't good, but she just played up all the bad stuff."

"Well, there was plenty to play up," pointed out Colin. "But you know, what surprised me was that I recognized a few of the quotes, from that conversation we had when Dennis made the team. Did you say that to her?"

Annoyed, Harry shook his head. "That's what I hate about the article, everyone will think I did. No, she got all the quotes in the article by hiding nearby as a beetle. She knew I would never have talked to her, and that I wouldn't have wanted the article written."

"Why not?" wondered Colin. "From what I know, it's basically true, and it makes you look good, unlike her other articles about you."

"It makes me look like some tragic victim, and... I don't know, even if she had just written the truth with no exaggeration, I feel like it's personal, that I don't need everyone to know everything bad that happened to me. I mean, Dennis, imagine that she had written an article about you, about how Hogsmeade affected you. How you struggled with what happened, how it was hard for you to go back there, but you did it anyway. Maybe it would be true, but it's personal, it's not the kind of thing you want everyone knowing, and reading about."

Dennis nodded somberly. "I guess I can see it when you put it that way. I wouldn't want to be written about like that. Of course, nobody would write an article about me like that. I guess that's a problem with being Harry Potter."

"There's some good things about it too, so I guess I can deal with it," he said.

He talked with them a little longer, then moved on; the next person he saw was Luna Lovegood. "Hi, Luna," he said.

"Thanks for coming."

"Oh, it's no problem, Professor, I wasn't busy," she said causally.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "You really don't have to call me 'Professor,' you know."

"Oh, I know," she agreed. "I just like to say it sometimes. It has a nice sound. 'Professor Potter.' It kind of rolls off the tongue." Harry nodded politely, as he had dealt with Luna enough to not be surprised when she said things that

sounded odd. "So, are you going to teach us how to do those spells of yours?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I haven't decided yet. I want to, but there's still a lot I don't know about how it works. Also, it asks a lot of the students, they might have to do things they aren't comfortable with."

"Like what?" inquired Luna.

"Like thinking about love, not being embarrassed by it, maybe even talking about it around other people they might not be close to," Harry explained.

Luna shrugged. "I can do that. I love my father, and my mother, even though she's gone. And my grandmother. There's really no one my age who I could say I love, but if there was, I wouldn't be embarrassed to say so."

"That's good," said Harry, impressed. "I have no trouble believing that."

"I'm glad," she said. Then, as if a thought had suddenly occurred to her, she added, "But I do like you a lot."

To Harry's surprise, he found that he wasn't embarrassed by what she'd said, probably because her manner was so casual and straightforward. He smiled and said, "Thank you, Luna. I like you a lot, too."

Smiling a little, she nodded. "I know, I can tell. It's in your eyes. You don't get embarrassed like you used to."

He shrugged. "After talking about love in front of the whole school, and in the newspapers, there's not that much left to be embarrassed about."

With obvious amusement, she replied, "I bet I could ask you things about you and Ginny that would embarrass you." He said nothing, but smiled in mild embarrassment at the thought. Nodding as though his reaction was what she had expected, she said, "But I don't really want to embarrass you, so I won't. Anyway, just keep in mind, if you do have a class on that, I want to be in it."

"I'll keep it in mind," he assured her.

"Good. Well, I hope I can talk to you some more later, but I should let some other people have a chance at you. Happy birthday." She reached up to kiss him on the cheek, then turned and walked away. Harry was reminded of when she had done something similar the year before, and smiled. She really would be good for a class on that, he thought.

Six hours later, after the last of the guests had left, Harry and his friends sat in the living room. "So, it seemed like you both had a good time," observed Hermione.

Neville nodded. "It was great. Thanks for doing it."

"Me too, of course," agreed Harry. "It was nice to see everyone again. Although I started getting tired of being asked if I was going to teach the new spells. I think almost everybody asked at some point."

"Well, it's easy to see why there's a lot of interest in it," said Neville. "But yes, for me too, there was one thing almost everyone mentioned. Bet you can't guess what it is," he added with mild sarcasm.

"Does it begin with the letter 'A'?" asked Ron in the same vein.

"I guess people can't put themselves in that position very well," said Neville. "I tell everyone that it's not really that brave, since there was no hope anyway, but they act like I'm just being modest."

"Welcome to my world," said Harry humorously. "But I guess it's not so surprising that people can't identify with it. Most of us have been in that kind of situation, and we know that you may as well be defiant if you think you're finished anyway... Hermione taunting Voldemort last month, Ginny not saying anything to Malfoy in the Chamber, Pansy more or less taunting Malfoy by talking about me."

"Hmmm, hadn't thought of it this way," said Ron. "I guess the only time I faced what looked like certain death was when we were surrounded by those spiders, and they probably wouldn't have understood defiance all that well. I did, however, acquit myself with extraordinary bravery, in that I did not wet my pants."

The others laughed heartily at Ron's unusual venture into self-deprecating humor. Pansy ran a hand through Ron's hair. "I'd say that's pretty brave," she agreed.

"That was very good, Ron," said Hermione as she finished laughing. "Well, I'm really glad it worked out so well. I just felt bad that so much was happening on your birthdays that we didn't really get to do much of anything. Not that we always have such a big deal about birthdays, since most people's happen during the school year, but this was the seventeenth for both of you, which is a little more important."

"Oh, I just remembered," said Ron, as he waved his wand, and a few seconds later an envelope came floating in. "It's nice to be able to do the spells silently, it's just kind of cool."

Anyway, I know we did the cards and gifts while everyone was here, but I wanted to save mine for when everyone had left. It's the kind of thing I didn't want Harry reading out loud, people might not have really understood."

Harry blinked in surprise. Had Ron written something heartfelt? It seemed out of character, but he supposed that after their Legilimency session, anything was possible. He was then surprised that Ron would worry that Harry would read such a card out loud.

Smiling, Ron handed Harry the card. As he opened it to read it, Harry wondered whether Ron could tell what he had been thinking. "You can read it out loud if you want," said Ron.

With another surprised expression, Harry did so. "'Dear Harry: On this, your seventeenth birthday, I wanted to take the opportunity to say a few things. These would ordinarily be difficult for me to say, but I'll do my best.

"We've known each other for six years now, and I can't imagine having a more...' there's a blank space, like nothing was written there." He looked at Ron in confusion.

Ron shrugged. "You know how I get embarrassed at things like that."

Harry was again surprised, as he thought Ron was past that. He continued reading: "...having a more ____ friend,'" he continued, having decided to pause for a second for every blank space he saw. "'When we first met, I knew immediately that I would never encounter a more ____ person, and that it was ____ that we would become friends. Ever since you showed such amazing ____ when you insisted that we save Hermione from the troll, our lives have never been anything but ____, and I'm ____ about it. Now, you get praised all the time, and it's very ____, since we all know how ____ you

are. And I know how embarrassed it makes you, which is very _____. But I wanted to say that you've had a _____ influence on my life, and I feel very _____. Even now, learning about the energy of love has been incredibly _____, and you are totally responsible for that. I think it is safe to say that you are a truly _____ person. I _____ you. Happy Birthday, Ron. P.S. It's really very _____ that you _____ me so much, so _____."

He looked at the still smiling Ron, very puzzled. "Am I supposed to guess what the blank words are, or..."

Ron shook his head. "You can use your wand over the blank spots, and the words will appear."

Harry took out his wand, held it over the card sentence by sentence, and read it again. Coming to the first blank, he read, "I can't imagine having a more *adequate* friend." He smiled at Ron, then continued, emphasizing slightly for the others' benefit the words in the formerly blank spaces. "When we first met, I knew immediately that I would never encounter a more *unremarkable* person, and that it was *pure chance* that we would become friends. Ever since you showed such amazing *recklessness* when you insisted that we save Hermione from the troll, our lives have never been anything but *dull*, and I'm *apathetic* about it."

Harry was now laughing as he read. "Now, you get praised all the time, and it's very *strange*, since we all know how *average* you are. And I know how embarrassed it makes you, which is very *entertaining*. But I wanted to say that you've had a *minor* influence on my life, and I feel very *indifferent*. Even now, learning about the energy of love has been incredibly *embarrassing*, and you are totally responsible for that. I think it is safe to say that you are a truly *unexceptional* person. I *kind of like* you. Happy Birthday,

Ron. P.S. It's really very *disturbing* that you *hug* me so much, so *cut it out*."

Still laughing, he said, "Well, you definitely get one for that," and moved over on the sofa and hugged Ron. "I meant every word of it," said Ron as he hugged Harry back, which made Harry laugh again.

"Thank you, Ron. I really appreciate the effort you put into that. It must have taken a while to write, not to mention the invisible ink."

"Yeah, it did take a while," Ron agreed casually. "Ten minutes at least."

"Don't let him fool you," said Pansy, looking at Ron proudly. "That took him quite a while, I saw him working on it."

"He wasn't fooling me," Harry assured her. "Ah, it's been a while since I've laughed that much." There was a silence, then he said, "It feels strange... the Skeeter thing is over, the Apparation crisis is over... I'm just trying to think, is there anything I have to be really thinking about? Can I just enjoy the rest of my summer? I mean, I'm going to be doing the energy-of-love sessions with the Aurors, but that's only a few hours a week."

"Because today is the day we're celebrating your birthday, Harry, I'm not going to answer that question," said Hermione humorously.

"Oh, yeah, the rulebook," he sighed. "That'll be fun. I'll be reading it, saying, 'oh, yeah, I broke this one, and that one...'"

"It'll help you remember them," said Ginny. "Well, apart from that, I think it's all right if you enjoy the rest of your summer."

In fact, I'll do my best to help."

"I have a feeling you will," he chuckled. He hoped the rest of the summer would be as peaceful as the first two weeks had been.

* * * * *

The next week was, at least. Harry had his sessions with Snape, energy-of-love sessions with the Aurors, Legilimency practice with Hermione almost every day, and reading the rule book to occupy him, but he still found plenty of time for leisure. He read Dumbledore's book, spent time with his friends, and luxuriated in his freedom. He spent the better part of one day with Remus, who assured him that he shouldn't feel bad about not being able to go to an amusement park on the day before his birthday, as they'd planned. "That was during the Apparation crisis, but you can't really be going to places where there are lots of Muggles anyway," Remus had pointed out. Harry knew it was true; he could imagine the potential for innocent Muggles to get caught in the crossfire.

Before his first energy-of-love session with the Aurors, Harry had the idea to include Remus in the sessions. Kingsley hadn't objected, which Harry assumed was partly because all the Aurors in the group knew Remus, as all were in the Order. Harry knew also that Kingsley wasn't likely to object to anything Harry suggested, as he had made clear that everything about the sessions was at Harry's discretion. Kingsley had decided not to participate in the sessions rather than forswear the use of the Killing Curse, but he did agree to allow Tonks, Cassandra, Jack, and Winston to do so, and they had. Kingsley had also pointed out that he wouldn't have been an ideal member of the first test group because his non-vocalized-spell score was already 100, so

unlike others, there would be no easy way to tell if he had reached the point where he could do the spells.

"How are the sessions with the Aurors going?" asked Hermione as they sat down to dinner on Friday.

Harry exchanged shrugs with Neville before answering. "Okay, I suppose. You know how it is, it's not the kind of thing where you can really tell anything. There are no obvious problems, anyway. Everyone's pretty serious about it, no one's reluctant or embarrassed or anything."

"I was wondering, Harry," asked Ron, "who's Remus going to focus on? It doesn't seem like he really has anybody. I mean, we all had each other."

"I don't know," said Harry. "I wondered about that myself, really. I'm not sure if I should ask him or not. With us, we all kind of knew already. Here, it's only been three sessions, so I didn't think it was necessary to just jump right into really personal stuff. I know we'll get there at some point soon, though."

"I'm just curious," said Arthur, "not knowing much about this... why is it necessary to talk about who you're thinking about when you're focusing on love? And is it necessary to focus on a particular person? Couldn't it be just on love as a concept, or could you even make up some idealized fantasy person and focus on that?"

"Those are all good questions, and I don't know the answer to any of them," acknowledged Harry. "But to try to answer the first one, part of the point is to overcome whatever embarrassment people may feel. Just saying out loud that you love this person, whether it's romantic love or friendship love, helps you... I don't know, embrace it, I guess. It makes it stronger, at least I think it does. The first time I ever said it

was after Hermione said it to me that day before the Voldemort dreams started, and I sometimes wonder if I would have managed what I did if that hadn't happened. I was less embarrassed to think about the fact that I loved her after I had said it. And, we did discover from our own sessions that if someone was embarrassed about it—"

"Though Harry isn't referring to anyone in particular, of course," said Ron with a straight face.

Harry smiled, then continued, "Saying it out loud helped. Again, part of the whole point of this is to not be embarrassed about it. You can't start out not being embarrassed, of course, you just have to work up to it. This is where it's a lot easier if you have someone you're in love with, you can focus particularly on them. With us, there was a point where—does anyone mind if I tell Arthur and Molly about this?" he asked his friends, who all gave their assent. "I thought it would be a good idea if we named a specific person we loved, but so it wouldn't be harder for Ron and Pansy, I asked us all to pick people other than the ones we were in relationships with. And so nobody would feel obligated to name someone who had named them, I asked everyone to write down the person's name first."

"And what happened was so strange," continued Hermione, "because it worked that way anyway: we all picked the person who had picked us. Harry and Pansy picked each other, Neville and Ginny did, and Ron and I did. We were pretty amazed, and we were all wondering if fate had gone a little differently, those could have been the relationships that ended up happening. And I could tell that Ron was dying to make some comment about how lucky he was to avoid ending up with me, but he was nice, and didn't."

"I was not," protested Ron, as the others chuckled. "Well, I wasn't dying to, anyway. The thought occurred to me, and I decided not to, is all. Boy, you're really going to be annoying once you start using Legilimency to tell if we're lying or not."

"I suppose so," agreed Hermione, wearing a greatly amused expression. "Good thing you didn't end up with me, huh?"

Everyone laughed, including Ron. "Well, I didn't say it, anyway. Let's just say I'm happy with how it ended up, I think we all are."

"That does seem safe to say," agreed Harry, as he looked across the table at Ginny.

There was silence for a minute as everyone devoted their attention to their food. Then Molly casually asked, "Harry, did you ever hear anything more from your cousin about the article, and your aunt and uncle's reaction to it?"

Harry hadn't thought about the topic at all since he had put down the anti-Disapparation plot at 4 Privet Drive. "No, nothing. I haven't heard from Dudley, and it's pretty unlikely I'd hear from Vernon or Petunia."

"I actually thought about inviting Dudley to your party," said Ginny. "I ended up not doing it mostly for the same reason you didn't take him to Diagon Alley, everyone would have been asking him about the article."

"Well, it's very nice that you're friends with him now," said Molly. Harry thought that 'friends' wasn't quite the right word—he felt that 'on good terms' might be better—but didn't bother to argue the point. "It's just too bad that that article had to come out, just when your aunt and uncle might have been realizing the kind of person you really are."

Harry shrugged. "They're never going to see me any differently than they always have," he said dismissively. "I was with them long enough to know that. All I can say is, thank goodness I'm here now instead of there."

"Well, of course we're very happy about that too, dear," said Molly. "But it isn't impossible, you know. You never know what could happen. Maybe if you wrote her a letter, explain what happened and that you had nothing to do with it—"

"No way," interrupted Harry firmly. "I don't need to explain myself to her."

"I'm not saying you did anything wrong, of course," said Molly soothingly, though Harry didn't feel soothed. "I just meant that she was probably coming around on you, because of those articles she was sent, and—"

"I don't need her to come around on me," snapped Harry, then tried to control his temper as his friends glanced at him with concern. "Seriously, she can think whatever she wants. She's felt that way for so long, I could save the world and cure cancer, and it wouldn't change the way she felt."

"I have a feeling he's right," chimed in Ron, earning an unhappy glance from Molly. "I mean, look at what those articles said about him, and she still jumped to the conclusion that he was responsible for this one. She didn't even ask him if he did anything for it or not."

"And this was even after Dudley told her that Harry had nothing to do with it," added Ginny. "Mum, I was wondering, who do you think would have bothered to cut out and send all those articles? Seems like a lot of trouble to go to."

Molly shrugged as she took a bite of food, but didn't answer. Harry thought her reaction seemed strange for her, and then

to his surprise, he got a flash of an image of the type he saw in Legilimency practice: he saw Molly using her wand and doing a Severing Charm to a newspaper. He gaped at her. "You? You sent her those articles?"

Molly looked up as if ready to deny what Harry had said, but obviously a look at Harry's face told her that it would be no use. "I see the Legilimency practice is really kicking in," commented Ron.

"I didn't see what harm it could do," said Molly defensively, as Harry again tried to keep his feelings under control. "I just wanted her to be able to see what a wonderful person she had there all this time, and didn't even know."

"And didn't even care," shot back Harry. "Her mind is made up about me."

"But it was working, it was changing, until that article last week," argued Molly. "They're your closest living relatives, you can't avoid dealing with them."

"I'll do my very best," said Harry fervently. "And I'm sure they will too, her and Vernon. Somehow I think with all of us trying, we'll manage."

Molly looked disappointed. "Harry, this isn't like you. And it wouldn't hurt to write them a letter, you wouldn't have to deal with them directly. Even if—"

"Mum, look,—" interrupted Ginny, who was in turn interrupted by Harry. "I'm not going to write her a letter!" he shouted. "I can't..." Emotion rising up, he impulsively stood. "Excuse me," he said, and walked away from the table quickly and headed up the stairs.

He entered the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Fawkes was on his perch, and as Harry lay on the bed he wondered whether Fawkes had been there for a while, or had appeared in the last minute, knowing Harry was coming. Harry silently asked Fawkes to stand on his chest, and Harry petted him as he did. He tried to calm his anger for Fawkes' sake, though a part of him wanted to feel angry. Partly at Molly for interfering, and partly at the situation, his whole childhood. He wondered if this was part of the effect phoenixes normally had on their companions, that they inspired their companions to manage their emotions better for the sake of the phoenix.

He spent the next twenty minutes thinking, going over what had happened, and trading impressions with Fawkes. He felt that Fawkes sympathized with what he had suffered, though he knew Fawkes couldn't have the proper perspective to really understand what Harry had been through, so Harry assumed it was a general sympathy because of his emotional state.

Harry heard a knock on the door, followed by Molly's voice. "Can I come in?" He hesitated for a second, then waved his wand, and the door opened. Molly closed the door behind her and sat down on his bed. Harry felt as though he should apologize for leaving the table, but he wanted her to be the one to speak first. Molly reached over to pet Fawkes. "It must be nice to have a phoenix," she said, her expression serious. "They don't fail you, like people will."

Harry was puzzled, wondering for a second who she was suggesting had failed whom. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said, to his surprise. "I suppose I just got too... invested in what I was doing. I just thought, 'wouldn't it be nice if I could make her see what she's missing, it would be so good for both of them.' Then the Skeeter article came along and messed up

my little plan. It never occurred to me that it would be hard for you, even if I tried to do most of the work myself."

She paused; Harry didn't speak partly because he didn't have anything to say, and partly because he could tell she wasn't finished. "The others jumped all over me after you left," she said ruefully. "Mostly Ron and Ginny. The others aren't comfortable with me enough yet to really criticize me, but they clearly agreed with Ron and Ginny. Even Arthur reminded me of how they acted when he came to get you for the Quidditch World Cup, they weren't even going to say goodbye to you. They all were more or less saying, you can't know what it was like for him, and if he's most comfortable putting it behind him and trying not to think about it, then you should let him. Ron said I was 'butting in,' which I suppose I was. I just want you to know that it's because I care, because I love you." With a very small smile, she added, "I do that with all my children, you just hadn't gotten to experience it yet."

"I know," said Harry. "And I know why you do it, I know you're trying to help. I just felt like you were asking something of me that I couldn't do. I can't look for her approval, and writing a letter would be doing that. I actually talked about this when Dudley was over last week."

"Yes, Ginny told me. Just now, she related most of that conversation to the rest of us. I know it's true, but it's just amazing to me that she could manage to not say one nice thing about you all your life. Sometimes it makes me want to cry, and sometimes it makes me angry. Maybe I've done this because I want to make it all better somehow, and I just have to accept the fact that it's in the past, there's not much I can do about it. Ginny said she wanted to hug you as who you were then, and I think that's how I feel too." She

extended a hand toward Harry, who was still lying on the bed. "But I would like to hug you as who you are now."

Fawkes lifted off of Harry's chest and landed on his perch as Harry reached for Molly's hand and let himself be pulled into a hug. "I'm sorry," she said again.

He squeezed her harder. "It's all right. At least I have someone who cares enough to want to butt in, I never had that before."

Molly laughed. "I'll always care enough to want to butt in; the question is, will I manage to not do it."

"Another thing I've never had before," said Harry as if just realizing it, "is someone who I think of as a parent apologizing to me."

She disengaged from the hug, keeping her hands on his shoulders. "I think it's not just your aunt and uncle; most parents don't do that. Arthur's joke about that is that most people feel that being a parent means never having to say you're sorry. But everyone makes mistakes, including parents. It's a good thing to do for other reasons too, it teaches the kids that it's all right to apologize, and then they'll probably do it with their kids when they grow up. I think if each generation can raise their children a little better than they were raised, we'll be doing all right."

He looked at her with admiration. "I don't know if I can do that."

She smiled. "Thank you. But you will, I'm pretty sure about that." She kissed him on the cheek, and got up and left.

Less than a minute later, Ginny burst into the room, ran to the bed, and hugged him tightly as she sat next to him. "I

wanted to come running right up behind you after you left," she said, "but Dad asked me not to. He said it would be better for you to have some time to sort out your thoughts by yourself, and I think he wanted Mum to be the first one to talk to you, so she could apologize without my having spent all that time telling you how right you were. Which you were, of course, she shouldn't have done that. It was funny, something about the way she looked made me ask her that question about who would have sent your aunt the articles; I just had this sudden feeling it was her, so I asked to see how she would react. Was it Legilimency that told you it was her?"

He nodded. "I didn't even mean to do it. I just got this image of her with a newspaper. When he was teaching me, Albus did say that you're more likely to do it unconsciously in emotionally charged situations, but that was the first time it ever happened like that."

"I guess I'll have to remember not to lie to you in emotionally charged situations in the future," she joked. Turning more serious, she added, "We all felt really bad for you," and he understood that she was referring to the other four of their group. "Mum gets kind of pushy sometimes and she can't see it, like how she was at first with the twins and their shop. She was stepping on a sensitive spot for you, and she didn't realize it."

"I wish it wasn't a sensitive spot," he said, sounding unhappy with himself. "I wish I could just not let it bother me. It usually doesn't unless someone brings it up, but I wish it didn't at all."

She took both his hands in hers. "That's way too much to expect of yourself. I know you've heard this before, but it really is true: it's amazing that you came out of that

childhood as well as you did. Most people would be permanently damaged, have huge self-esteem problems, be bitter or withdrawn. You have your problems, but they're close to the kind of problems most people have. Considering what you went through, it speaks well of you that you don't hate your aunt and uncle with a fiery passion. None of us would blame you if you did."

"There were times when I did," he admitted, and she gripped his hands harder. "I guess you just get used to some things. Like Voldemort trying to kill me all the time."

She let go of his hands and hugged him again. "My poor Harry, you've had such a hard life..."

"Well, it got a lot better about four months ago," he said. "And after he's gone, it'll be much, much better. I do think that'll happen, and then we can have normal lives."

She looked at him proudly. "I think so too. You'll find a way to beat him."

He smiled at her confidence. "And then, my biggest problem will be trying to deal with my childhood," he said, half-joking. "Or, ignore it. And trying to teach the energy of love. But those sound like pretty good problems right now."

* * * * *

The next day, a Saturday, was another quiet one for Harry; he had a fly with Ron, practiced dueling with Neville, and sat around doing nothing with Ginny in the morning. After lunch, he spent some time sitting in a conjured chair outside and reading the Hogwarts rule book, and found that his eyes started to close occasionally as he did so. When he finished, he was halfway through the book, but he wasn't sure how

much he would remember. He hoped McGonagall wouldn't quiz him on it, but he had a feeling she would.

His hand tingled, and he held it up. He remembered with a little sadness that he used to smile every time it did, and he still did sometimes, but it had happened enough that by now his usual reaction was to be curious as to why Ginny was calling him. "Could you come in for a minute?" she asked. He nodded, and headed to the front door.

Stepping inside, he was very surprised to see a familiar sight: all ten of his Slytherin first-year students, soon to be second years. "Hello, Professor," they greeted him, almost in chorus.

He grinned broadly, very pleased to see them. "Wow, what a surprise," he said, as he sat on the sofa to be closer to their eye level. "What are you doing here?"

"We're visiting Pansy," said a smiling Helen, glancing up at Pansy, who was standing behind the sofa. "Of course, this way we get to visit you too, but she explained to us that we can't come over here to visit you, because it wouldn't look good to the other first years, and they would ask you why you had us over but not them. But Pansy's a student, not a teacher, so we can visit her if we want."

"And it just so happens that you live here too," added a girl named Sylvia.

"Very convenient," said Harry, still smiling.

"We thought so," agreed Augustina. "And besides, David and Andrea started telling the other first years as soon as they got back from your birthday party. We were jealous, we wanted to come too."

"Sorry, that was Hermione and me," said Ginny. "Harry didn't know about it, of course, and we had to decide who to invite. We knew Harry would want to see all of you, but there was the problem of it looking like you were his favorites, and we couldn't have forty people over. We invited David and Andrea because their brothers were invited, and it seemed wrong not to invite them too. But we wanted to invite you."

"We know," said Hedrick. "They knew that, they told us that was why they were invited. But we get to be here now, anyway. Visiting Pansy," he added with a smile. Looking up at her, he quickly added, "We would want to do that, anyway, of course."

Everyone laughed, especially Pansy. "Nice of you to add that, Hedrick. I mean, I don't mind being an excuse to visit Harry, but I hope you want to see me, too."

"We do, obviously," Augustina assured her. "He's just being kind of dumb. One of those things boys do sometimes, we think."

Harry saw Pansy form a new smile, and start to speak. "Don't say it," he said quickly, pointing a finger at her. The Slytherins laughed again as Pansy feigned wounded innocence. "I wasn't going to say anything."

"Yeah, right," said Harry. "I'm not dumb. At least not right this second."

"Oh, Professor," said Augustina earnestly, "are you going to teach us how to use the energy of love this year?"

Harry sighed. "Well," he said wearily, "everyone else I've met this summer has asked, so I suppose I shouldn't-" He cut himself off as Slytherins started laughing and looking at Pansy, who was laughing as well.

"We know," said Augustina, smiling. "Pansy told us to ask you."

Trying not to smile, he looked back at Pansy, who leaned forward against the back of the sofa and playfully ran a hand through his hair to mess it up. "Fortunately, you like it that I tease you. You have said that before, haven't you?"

Now he couldn't help but smile. "Unfortunately, yes. I assume you already told them that I haven't decided?"

"Yes, I did. But I talked to them for a while before you came in, they've been here for a half hour. I explained that you can't teach just them, for the same reason you can't have them over. But I can, so I'm going to try to teach them. It's not favoritism, since I'm a student and they're students."

Harry raised his eyebrows, impressed. "That's a good idea, I hadn't thought of that. No, there's no reason you can't, you could certainly teach it as well as I could."

She looked taken aback at his expression of confidence. "I don't know about that, but I'll do my best. And even if you can't officially teach it, you can visit from time to time and give us advice."

"I suppose there wouldn't be anything wrong with that," he agreed. "Have you given them all the warnings?"

"I think so... that it's hard, it might take a long time, it could get embarrassing, that we don't know everything about it. That's pretty much it, right?"

"That's about it," he said, looking the Slytherins over. "All that doesn't bother you?"

Helen shook her head. "We're really happy that she's willing to try, we know it might not work, or might take a long time. I think the boys are kind of scared of the whole embarrassment thing, though."

"We are not!" protested David Septus, a little too vehemently, Harry thought. He looked at David seriously and said, "You know, David, I've told Ron that I love him, directly to his face." He paused, watching David's eyes go wide. "Still not scared?"

"Okay, maybe a little," admitted David as the girls giggled. "But we still want to do it."

"That's very brave of you," said Harry, half-seriously. "Just don't get discouraged, and don't expect it to happen by any particular time." Turning to Pansy, he asked, "Is this going to be secret, or open?"

"Secret is probably best, I think," she said. "Even though there's nothing wrong with it, I'd rather everyone didn't know, because then they'll be asking questions, maybe being jealous, that kind of thing. I was thinking we'd have the sessions in the boys' dormitory, though I'm not sure how we'd get the girls in there without anyone noticing. Maybe I could get Hermione to teach me that Disillusionment spell that Kingsley taught her. I'm sure we can work something out."

"I would think they could just go in there openly, nobody would think it was so strange," suggested Harry, as some Slytherins nodded in agreement. "Everyone knows they're close. Anyway, were you going to start today?"

Pansy nodded, but Helen spoke first. "And we already know what to do a little, since you're teaching my Dad, and he's told me about it."

Hedrick looked at Helen in obvious mock surprise. "Professor Potter is teaching your father? Really? When did that happen?" As Helen gave him a dirty look, Hedrick said to Harry, "She's only mentioned it about twenty times."

Harry smiled. To Helen, he said, "Well, I'm glad you're excited about it." Helen turned to Hedrick with a superior 'so there' look. Harry stayed with them for another hour, talking and then helping Pansy start them on their first session. Finally he left, going up to the girls' bedroom to meet Hermione for their Legilimency practice.

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

She shook her head, dismissing his apology. "Pansy told me she was going to surprise you with the first years, so I wasn't expecting you. I've been keeping busy."

"Yes, I see that," he agreed, taking in the three open Transfiguration texts on the bed. "Ready to get started?"

"Okay, just a minute," she said. She cleared the books off the bed, and they sat on beds opposite each other. They had recently been spending half of the sessions working on Hermione's Legilimency skills so that she could eventually test Harry's Occlumency skills, but she had not yet managed to get into Harry's mind, even though he was putting up no barriers. After ten minutes of trying, however, Hermione managed it for the first time. Harry saw various images of love flash through his mind, most involving Ginny.

He smiled as she withdrew from his mind. "Congratulations," he said.

"Thanks," she said, smiling as well. "Boy, that's not easy."

"I know, I remember how hard it was the first time," he agreed. "You should keep doing it, for as long as you can before you get too tired. The more you do it now, the easier it'll be to remember how it felt the next time we do it." She agreed, and she kept it up, looking first for images of love, then ten minutes later, focusing on the idea of friendship, as Harry explained how to search for specific types of emotions associated with particular memories. He saw mostly memories of his friendship with her and Ron, and a few later ones involving Ginny, Pansy, and Neville.

She switched focus again, now looking for memories associated with feelings of pride. Harry saw himself snatching the golden egg from under the Hungarian Horntail and seeing the crowd applaud wildly. He saw himself watch Ginny successfully use his Cruciatus Curse shield for the first time. He saw himself being awarded sixty points at the end of his first year, helping Gryffindor win the House Cup. He saw Dumbledore single out Pansy for praise before the final Quidditch match a few months ago. He saw Ginny, standing before him in his Hogwarts quarters, let her robes drop at her feet, himself gaping in shock, then getting up and covering her with his robe. Hermione gave a start when she saw it, but didn't recoil or do anything unusual, letting the memory play out naturally as she did the others. She withdrew from his mind, and smiled ruefully. "One of the reasons I chose pride was that I thought it would be safe, like friendship, that I wouldn't see anything like that. Of course, now that I've seen it, it makes perfect sense; she was doing something dramatic to get you both past your inhibitions, and you were proud of her for being brave enough to do it. You don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but... I assume that was just before your first time?"

He nodded, surprised that he wasn't more embarrassed than he was. "After she did that, it just didn't seem so difficult, all

of a sudden. I'm sure I couldn't have done it."

"I think I understand a little how you felt when you saw that thing with Neville and me," she said. "I'm not that embarrassed, but a little. Partly for the obvious reason, but also because it was an important and really personal moment for both of you, something that really, no one else should see. But I have to say, it was a really nice moment. You said just the right thing."

He shrugged. "I just said what I thought. About the other thing, I suppose in a way you're right, but it doesn't bother me, probably because it's you, and I think it won't bother Ginny either. I guess we're so used to the idea that anything could be seen by Snape that you seeing it doesn't seem like such a big deal."

"Has he seen it?" she asked. "This particular one?"

"No, he hasn't seen anything like that."

"Really? I would have thought he was bound to, by now."

"He's very skilled with this, he can pretty much see exactly what he wants; nothing he sees is by accident, like with us," explained Harry. "I think it's partly because he's been going through my childhood, and as he gets closer to the present, he's been slowing down, looking in more detail. But he has covered recent days where Ginny and I have done stuff, and he knows we're doing it, but he skips it. It could be because he's more interested in knowing what's happening and he can find out from me, but I also think he's deliberately waiting to look at anything like that. I think he wants to give us as much time as possible to get used to... doing sexual things before he views them. What?" he asked as she broke into a smile.

"Sorry, it's just that Ginny's told Pansy and I that you get embarrassed at the mention of that word, and you did just then. I don't mean to tease you about it, I just couldn't help smiling, it was cute."

He shook his head. "It's a good thing that I've already gotten used to the idea that I'm not going to have the kind of privacy about this kind of thing that most people have."

He meant the comment to be humorous, but Hermione looked concerned. "Does it bother you that Ginny told us that?"

"No, not really," he said. "Maybe I shouldn't have said that, that way. I mean, I don't talk about that kind of thing with Ron and Neville, but I know that girls talk about stuff like that that guys don't. Really, it doesn't bother me, I guess it's the whole situation, how strange it is. I mean, usually nobody else would see what you just saw, but besides you, Snape will probably see it eventually, and Skeeter saw it, too. It's just strange."

Hermione's mouth opened in realization. "That was what she meant... I didn't get it, what she said, about she didn't want to see that..." Hermione alternated between expressions of disgust and sympathy for Harry. "No wonder you were so mad... what a despicable thing to say. Well..." She trailed off again, now looking sad. "And now, the thought that goes through my head is, well, at least she's dead now, and some part of me still feels that she deserved it, and then I get back to that whole thing. I'm still wrestling with this, as you can tell. Even a week later, it's still hard not to be satisfied that she's dead. She was so awful."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish there was something I could do."

"I know. But all you can do is be supportive, which you have done, and I appreciate it. I just have to fight with this. Anyway, let's get back to it. I assume it's still safe to go with pride, nothing else like that is going to come up?"

"No, I don't think so, I think that was kind of an exception. It should be all right. But even if you did stumble across something, I'd deal with it." He paused, thinking. "I wonder if this is why Legilimency isn't exactly a common skill, because teaching and practicing requires such a... giving up your privacy, most people aren't going to want to do it."

"That, and it's pretty hard," Hermione agreed. "From what I read, most people can't do it, it requires a certain amount of magical power. I probably couldn't do it if I weren't using the energy of love. Oh, I was wondering... can you look for memories associated with a certain person? I was thinking that if I looked for things just about me, I wouldn't find anything sexual."

"I've never tried that, but you should be able to do it. But really, you shouldn't worry about seeing sexual stuff. I think the one time it's happened with each of us has been a real fluke, and that most of the time that's not going to come up unless you're trying to see it. I mean, I've done this with you plenty over the past month, and nothing has come up. I just don't think it's going to."

She nodded and resumed practicing. After five minutes, she paused. "There's something in there that... feels strange, is the best way I can put it. It feels like there's a barrier there, even though I know you're not putting up one. Maybe it's my imagination, since this is the first time I've gotten this far, but somehow I don't think so. Hold on, let me check something."

Hermione reached into her trunk and pulled out a book, obviously a Hogwarts library book, on Legilimency. She spent a minute flipping through it, then a few minutes reading. She looked up at Harry with surprise and concern. "Harry... I can't be certain, but the book describes what I encountered almost exactly. I think someone's done a Memory Charm on you."

Harry stared at her, stunned. "Are you... I was going to say 'are you sure,' but you just said you're not." He started wondering who would have done it, and he found that Hermione was wondering too.

"If this is what it is, it was probably a Dark wizard, maybe Voldemort. Maybe even Malfoy, if he was able to take you by surprise."

"I have to find out what it is," said Harry firmly. "How do you break a Memory Charm?"

"I'm not sure, this book doesn't cover that. We'd have to go to the Hogwarts library, the books in the Restricted section must have information on that. But something else just occurred to me... I almost hate to suggest this, but what if this was done by someone friendly, for your own good, or protection? What if you saw something awful or disturbing, and, let's say, an Auror or Dumbledore did this to help you? You could have even agreed to it, for all we know."

Harry found the thought itself disturbing. "I don't think of myself as the type to agree to having a Memory Charm, but I understand that there could be circumstances I couldn't imagine. Still, I have to know. If it was you, you'd want to know, you couldn't rest until you knew."

"I suppose so," she reluctantly agreed. "The bright side is that if we break it, and it turns out it was there for a good

reason, we can just have it put back and I would know not to mention it in the future. I guess it's off to the library." Fawkes appeared, and they held onto each other and grasped his tail.

Hermione quickly found the relevant books, and they sat down and each looked through one. After twenty minutes, Hermione said, "Okay, this one has it, and it's good news; we should be able to do it. Breaking a Memory Charm yourself is easier than someone else trying to do it, and completely safe. There's only one catch: you have to be stronger than whoever did it to you. Fortunately, in your case, that's not a problem."

"What do I have to do?" he asked.

"We," she corrected him. "Someone has to help, and it has to be a Legilimens. Even though I'm just a beginner, I can do what needs to be done. Here, read this section, it explains what you have to do."

He read, and found that he had to focus a certain kind of mental energy in a certain direction. Hermione would be focusing on the area of his mind where the Memory Charm was, in a sense guiding him to the proper spot. The book said that it could take anywhere from a few minutes to a half hour, so Harry was prepared to be patient. He found that he was tense, wondering what he might find. He reconsidered whether to do it, but only for a moment. He knew himself well enough to know that he had to know, he couldn't accept not knowing. "Okay, I'm ready," he said.

She cast Legilimens on him, and looked around again. "I have it, you can go ahead," she said. Harry focused the mental energy as directed by the book, trying to shut out all other thoughts. To his surprise, in less than a minute he

could start to feel the memory awaken, and he wondered if it was faster than expected because he was using the energy of love. The memory started to come into focus.

Harry was sitting in his usual chair in Snape's office, later the same day of Skeeter's visit to the Burrow. Snape viewed memories of the events of the last twenty-four hours since the previous session. Snape glossed over Harry's shift with the Aurors, as there had been no Apparation attempts, and started viewing his and Hermione's meeting with Skeeter. He viewed all of it, then cast Legilimens on Harry again, and viewed it again. He sat silently for a minute, deep in thought. "What is it?" Harry saw himself ask Snape. Snape didn't answer. He waved his wand at Harry, whose eyes suddenly looked glazed. Feeling the memory, Harry realized that it was a Confundus Curse, to disorient him. Snape walked to a shelf, and produced a pair of scissors and a small jar. He approached Harry and cut off a small amount of hair from the left side of Harry's head, letting the hair fall into the jar. He performed another spell, and said to Harry, "The Apparation crisis will soon be over, and it would be nice for you and Ginny to celebrate. Perhaps at a restaurant such as the Golden Dragon in Diagon Alley. You deserve to enjoy yourselves, and you should not be cowed into never going out in public. Friday at seven-thirty would be a good time." He waved his wand again, first lifting the Confundus Charm, then applying the Memory Charm. He then resumed viewing memories of Harry's fourth year at Hogwarts.

In the Hogwarts library Harry sat silently, dumbfounded. He looked at an astonished Hermione. "You saw it?" he asked.

Eyes wide, she nodded. "You should call Ginny, have Fawkes bring her. She needs to know this."

He slowly nodded, still stunned by what he had seen. He lifted his hand and looked into his palm. She smiled, but he didn't return her smile. "Could you join us? Fawkes'll be there for you."

"Yeah, okay, he's here," she said. A few seconds later, she and Fawkes appeared. Taking in their expressions, she asked, "What happened?"

"We just found out," he said heavily, "that Snape killed Skeeter." She, too, was astonished. "He was never a suspect because I thought he didn't know about her blackmail threats, but I was wrong. I said he didn't view my memories of our meeting with Skeeter. He did view them, took a few hairs from me, then did a Memory Charm on me." To Hermione, he asked, "What was that other one he did, the one about the Golden Dragon?"

"I've heard of it, but never seen it done," she answered. "It's called a Suggestion Charm. It's not like the Imperius Curse, because you're not making them do something, you're just giving them the idea, and they don't remember that you've done it. It has to be something the person might have done anyway, if they had thought of it." To Ginny, she explained, "He did that to Harry, suggested that you and he go to the Golden Dragon, even suggested the day and time you ended up going."

"I don't believe it," said Ginny quietly.

"Obviously, he was setting it up so you wouldn't be implicated, which was one of the possibilities we talked about after it happened," said Hermione. "And he wouldn't be suspected, because only we would know there was even a chance of his finding out this way, and it didn't occur to any of us that he would do this."

Ginny looked at Harry with obvious concern. "How do you feel about this? What are you thinking?"

"I don't know what to think," he said slowly. "I guess I have this feeling of... being taken advantage of, somehow. I feel as though I should be morally outraged that he would kill someone like that, in cold blood... maybe I'm just too surprised right now, but I don't feel that. I know he has no conscience, so I'm not surprised that he could do it. I would feel guilty that what he did helped us, but I know he didn't do it to help us, that it was because of the information she had. It's like, I can play both sides of the conversation we'll have about this. He'll say it had to be done, and I'll say that killing is wrong. We already had a conversation a lot like it. He may even say that it was better that he did it because he spared McGonagall, who does have a conscience, the decision of whether to do it or not. And she would say that it was her decision to make, and that he shouldn't have done it without consulting her, which he obviously did."

"Very perceptive, Harry," said McGonagall, walking into the library. "That is indeed almost exactly the conversation we had. But as I'm sure you know, his main intent was not to spare me the decision, but to serve the Order by doing something that to him clearly needed to be done." She sat at the table with them, addressing Harry. "I have been eavesdropping for the past few minutes, for which I apologize, but I wanted to know how you felt before talking to you about this. It was not that helpful, as it seems you yourself do not know how you feel. I can certainly understand. Professor Snape will be unable to sympathize with how this must make you feel, but I do, for what little consolation that may be to you."

Harry was silent. "How did you know we were here?" asked Hermione.

"I placed a movement detection charm on the books which explain how Memory Charms are broken, knowing that if anyone tried to access them, it would be you. Professor Snape did as well, as he wanted to know when you broke through the Charm. He knew you would at some point."

"How long have you known?" asked Hermione.

"He told me soon after he did it; I believe it was a half hour after I finished talking to you that night."

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Harry, a definite accusation in his tone and his eyes.

She looked uncomfortable. "I very seriously considered it. I obviously do not condone what he did, either Skeeter's murder or the Memory Charm, and you did deserve to know. But it was already done, and I could see no benefit in telling you immediately. You and your friends were recovering from a trying time, and it seemed better that you have time to recover, not to have one more thing over which to wrestle with the moral implications. In particular, I did not wish to tell you but ask you not to tell Hermione, and she had already had a difficult enough week. Like Professor Snape, I knew you would find the Memory Charm eventually."

Harry was inclined not to accept any explanation she gave, but what she said about Hermione made him think again. Had he been told the day after it happened, he knew he wouldn't have told Hermione, and he had been through a lot too; if he could justify not telling her, McGonagall could justify not telling him. Even so, part of him was angry with McGonagall anyway, while the rational part told him to think of events as a member of the Order, not as a teenager whose feelings had been hurt.

Confused and overwhelmed, he bowed his head, resting it in his hands. Ginny got up and moved her chair next to his, sat down, and put an arm around him, moving her hand across his back. He looked up to see McGonagall give Ginny a reproving look. Ginny glared back at McGonagall, her protective instincts obviously aroused; Harry knew that she was letting McGonagall know that she would comfort Harry regardless of what McGonagall thought of it. McGonagall sighed lightly and looked away, conceding the silent argument. He gratefully reached for Ginny's free hand, not caring what McGonagall thought either.

Hermione spoke again; Harry wondered whether she was asking questions so he could get more information, as he seemed to be in no frame of mind to ask questions. "Why was it necessary for him to assume Harry's appearance? Couldn't he have just made himself invisible and broken into her place?"

"He could have, but he judged that the best chance for there to be no mishaps was to assume the identity of someone she would not turn away from her door," McGonagall explained. "It would also have the advantage of making it appear that the attack was sponsored by Voldemort. It was crucial to him that he take her by surprise; had she managed to get off a scream or any sort of warning, he would have had to leave hastily, and there were things he wanted to accomplish before leaving. For example, he wanted to find out who, if anyone, she had told, and whether she had written down any highly sensitive information."

Hermione went pale. "He didn't... torture her?"

"No, fortunately," said McGonagall, looking relieved that she didn't have to give an affirmative answer. "He was able to retrieve the information using Legilimency. She had not told

anyone. She had written things down, in the draft of the book she was working on. He was able to locate the materials and dispose of them."

"After disposing of her," said Harry sullenly.

She regarded him tolerantly. "I have already said that I do not approve of what he did. I feel that killing is a last resort, not a first resort. But it must not be overlooked that his actions may have saved our cause, saved thousands of lives. She was unbalanced, she could have said anything to anyone. It was not his decision to make, but it was a reasonable decision."

Harry's face was a mask, expressionless. "I'd rather that kind of decision was made by someone with a conscience. If we kill someone, we should at least suffer for it."

She met his gaze. "He suffered, Harry. Not from an attack of conscience, but he suffered. You can be sure of that."

"You mean, in kind of the same way he did by doing the Cruciatus Curse on me in the demonstration last year."

She nodded. "Yes, but worse. In any case, I do agree, Harry. I would rather have made the decision myself. I do not wish to abandon all morality because our enemies have done so. He simply felt that this unquestionably needed to be done."

Harry closed his eyes, then opened them again; his face now reflected his turmoil. "Part of the point of this is that I'm supposed to care about him, to want to help him. That was going all right, I felt like I was getting somewhere. But how am I supposed to feel that way now? He just..."

The rest looked at him sympathetically. "I cannot answer that, Harry," said McGonagall. "I understand how you feel, as

well as I can without actually being in your position. I can only suggest that you try to look at this situation from his point of view as best you can."

She stood to leave. "He wished you to come see him after you found out. Not for a session; he understands that you will need to take some time to process this information. He wishes to discuss a few things with you." McGonagall turned and left.

Harry turned to Hermione and Ginny. "I'd really rather not see him just this moment."

"I can understand that," said Hermione quietly. "Are you not going to?"

Harry wondered if this was an indication of Hermione trying to change her character after the Skeeter trial; he would normally have expected her to tell him that he should do it. "No, I guess I should," he said reluctantly. "I was going to say, maybe he'll tell me something that'll change the way I see this, but I somehow doubt it. He killed a person, and maybe he didn't have to..."

"He had to," said Ginny, to Harry and Hermione's surprise. "I don't like it any more than you do, you know that. But if Skeeter released that information, we could have lost Snape and had Voldemort find out all kinds of stuff. Even if Skeeter had truthfully said that she wasn't going to tell anyone, she could have always changed her mind."

"She still could have been given a Memory Charm," argued Harry.

"And suppose Voldemort decided to grab her to grill her for information about you?" responded Ginny. "He could have read the article, figured out that it was at least possible that

she'd spent time as a beetle around you and gathered some interesting information, and thought it was a good idea to grab her and see what she knew. If that happened, the Memory Charm wouldn't matter."

"McGonagall said last week that if she was convinced that Skeeter didn't plan on telling anyone, she would have let her live," pointed out Harry.

"And Albus would definitely have let her live, no matter what, he wouldn't have killed her or condoned it," said Hermione. "But Ginny's point is still valid, it's just a matter of how many chances you're willing to take for the sake of doing the moral thing. Look at the chances Albus was willing to take last year, chances we wouldn't have taken. One of them would've gotten you killed if not for Snape. One got Pansy tortured. I mean, murder is wrong, but in this kind of situation... I'm not saying I would've agreed with what Snape did... well, I would have, but for all the wrong reasons." She glanced down, obviously unhappy with herself. "But with so many lives at stake, it's not that simple. There's a lot to what Ginny's saying."

Harry briefly wondered whether they were making the arguments to help mitigate the discomfort he felt at what Snape had done, but he couldn't deny that they were valid points. He also knew that McGonagall and Kingsley, both of whom he considered to be moral people, would have killed her under certain circumstances.

"Well, I'd better get this over with," he said. "I don't know how long this will take, but would you both mind waiting for me, in my quarters? I have a feeling I'm going to need to talk about it afterwards, and I may not be able to at the Burrow."

"Of course," said Hermione, as Ginny nodded. They got up and left the library together.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 8, Snape's Reward: Harry struggles to accept the idea that he's helping someone who kills in cold blood, but is soon reminded that there are worse things.

From Chapter 8: "It's like, the good thing about helping me is that when your loved ones die, you get a message from them after they're gone. The bad thing is, your loved ones die."

"A lot of people died sixteen years ago," said Arthur. "A lot were helping Dumbledore, but that doesn't make it his fault. I know you've heard this before, but we're going to keep telling you."

Harry nodded, wondering if they felt that he was wallowing in self-pity by making comments like the one he had just made; he then wondered if he actually was. All he knew was that it was how he felt.

8. Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Snape's Reward

Harry walked into Snape's office, the door already open. He sat in his usual chair. Frustrated, he said, "I wanted to come in here ranting about how murder is wrong, and how could you kill someone just like that, and so on."

Again, Snape seemed to be trying hard to keep his emotions in check. "I half expected you to," he said evenly.

Harry grunted. "It's nice to be able to exceed your expectations. I won't pretend I'm not upset, but obviously you expected that as well." Snape nodded slightly, saying nothing. Harry continued, "I've talked to McGonagall, and Hermione and Ginny. I know what you did, and I understand why you did it. I understand all the arguments for killing her, and there'd be no point debating it with you. But you did a Memory Charm on me without my consent, and you manipulated me to go to the restaurant. What I want to know is, how am I supposed to sit here in the future and trust you? How do I know you won't do something similar in the future? I have to be able to trust you, to do this."

Snape seemed to repress a reaction, then paused a few seconds before answering Harry's question. "What you may trust, Professor, is that I will take any and all actions necessary to ensure the defeat of the Dark Lord. There is nothing more than that which I can tell you, and nothing more which is important."

Harry didn't respond directly, as Snape's response, again, was expected. "I also thought that you would consider what you learned from us doing this as something not to be repeated, or acted on. Do you not think of it that way, or did you just consider this situation an exception?"

"I accept it as a general principle," responded Snape, "but of course circumstances may force actions different from generally accepted ones. As the headmistress has already told you, it was highly negligent of you not to report Skeeter's threats immediately. Every day that passed was another day containing a risk that Skeeter would reveal what she knew, or be abducted by the Dark Lord. I am surprised that that did not occur to you as a possibility."

"Ginny just made that argument a few minutes ago," Harry acknowledged. "She said that from your point of view, there simply wasn't any choice but to do what you did."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "It seems that Miss Weasley is more intelligent and perceptive than I gave her credit for. Yes, there was no choice. It was difficult enough to wait for the two days required to arrange circumstances so that there would be no doubt of your lack of involvement; I was greatly concerned that the Dark Lord would take action before your visit to the restaurant. I reluctantly took that risk, understanding that your standing in the community is important in its own way to our cause.

"I knew you would be dismayed by my actions, but I felt that you would at some level understand the necessity of it, and would eventually 'get past' your emotional reaction. In any event, I could not allow that to be a consideration in what I did. I asked you that 'hypothetical' question about Mr. Shacklebolt in the hope that you would think carefully about

the issues involved, in anticipation of the day you discovered what had been done."

"Well, that worked too," said Harry, making no attempt to hide his annoyance. "I would probably have had a worse reaction than this if I hadn't thought about it so much."

"You do have the capacity to learn, if you apply yourself," said Snape. Harry looked at him sharply, wondering if he was being mocked. Deciding he wasn't, he settled down as Snape continued. "Your moral concerns still prevent you from seeing the necessity more clearly. I strongly suspect that Miss Weasley sees it more clearly because she quite properly equates the success of the struggle against the Dark Lord with your personal survival, and would take or authorize any action necessary to your survival, placing that ahead of her notions of morality. If you lost one of your group of friends to this fight, as you nearly lost Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom, your attitudes regarding this might change."

Harry found himself wondering if that was true, and whether he should change his attitudes now in the hopes of preventing it from happening, or try harder not to condone killing even if it did happen. He wondered if Snape knew that was his worst fear; Snape had not yet seen the boggart assume Pansy's form in his memories.

"Maybe I shouldn't ask this," said Harry, "but I will anyway, I feel like I have to know. Did you enjoy killing her?"

Snape's first reaction was a smirk, which went away quickly; Harry wondered if that was on purpose. "You wish to judge me, or to decide whether to judge me. Lacking the ability to judge me against a standard of morality, and knowing that

my decision was a rational one, you look for other ways to judge my behavior."

"Maybe I am," Harry admitted, "but I want to make a positive judgment. I want to be able to say, he did it only because he thought he had to, there was nothing else in it for him, nothing else that made him lean toward killing her."

"I am doing my best to be tolerant, Professor, but my patience is wearing thin," said Snape, tone still even. "The fact that my decision was rationally correct should be sufficient to assuage whatever concerns you may have. However, I will indulge you, and answer your question."

"Did I enjoy it? Of course I did. I might as well ask you if you enjoyed yourself after a session of sexual activity with Miss Weasley. For one who has been... modified as I have, to kill is the greatest pleasure one can experience; it is somewhat analogous to sexual release. Now, would I have wished to kill her, or anyone, even without a good reason? No, I would not. Even though it is pleasurable in the moment, it exacts a toll on someone such as myself who resists such pleasures. You may recall that I requested your presence for five consecutive days after Skeeter was killed. This was because such a thing... leads me further into temptation, one could say. My daily life is a continuing effort to resist such pleasures, all the more difficult as they are the only ones available to me. I prefer not to kill, though obviously not as a matter of morality. It is more in the way that an alcoholic resists alcohol."

"Now, before I continue, there is something else I should inform you of, as it has a connection to your question. You assumed, correctly, that the Dark Lord commissioned the murder of Fudge. What you did not know was that it was I who was selected to carry out the act."

Harry gaped. Killing someone like Skeeter was bad enough, but Fudge hadn't been a threat, or done anything immoral as Skeeter had. "And you did it?" Snape nodded. "You couldn't have avoided it somehow..." As he said it, Harry knew it sounded stupid, but he was still shocked.

"Oh, yes," said Snape airily, "I am sure the Dark Lord would have listened to a well-reasoned argument. Perhaps I could have persuaded him that Fudge wasn't such a bad fellow. *Think!*" Snape nearly shouted. "The moment the Dark Lord decided to have him killed, Fudge was as good as dead. Were it not I, it would have been someone else. Moreover, any reluctance of my part to do as he asked would have been highly suspicious, and endangered my status as having his confidence. You can surely understand that; you correctly judged Fudge's importance to be so low as to not be worth even a small risk to the lives of your friends. Equally, it was not worth the greater risk to my services to the Order for me to do anything but what he asked.

"Now, Professor... here is the irony, though I do not know whether you will be able to appreciate it. The Dark Lord chose me to kill Fudge as a reward." Harry's eyes went wide as Snape continued. "He had been pleased with my recent services, such as 'stealing' the false prophecy from the headmaster's Pensieve, and informing him of Miss Granger's being involved in a plot against him. Obviously, the events connected with that did not go well for him, but he did not hold me responsible. He considered that I had done my job well, and events beyond my control-his sudden unconsciousness-were responsible for the less than satisfactory end to that sequence of events. Considering that it was the Minister of Magic who was to be killed, it was a plum assignment, to be given only to one who was greatly in favor."

Harry had gotten over his shock, understanding that the situation that Snape was in didn't allow for much flexibility of action. "I bet they'd love to kill me."

"Indeed, it is understood that the one who manages it will achieve an exalted status," confirmed Snape. "In fact, the Dark Lord has made an exception to his usual policy of not allowing actions not previously approved; if someone feels they have a good chance to kill you, they need not seek his specific approval to attempt it."

Harry rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I suppose that's a compliment."

"A high compliment," said Snape, "and a measure of the Dark Lord's desperation. In any case, the irony is that of all Death Eaters, I was the only one who would have actually preferred not to carry out the act. However, I did, because there was no real alternative. If you search your recollections, you will find that I requested your presence for five consecutive days at that time as well, starting with the night Fudge died. It had been my intention to call on you as little as possible during the Apparation struggle, but after having killed, I could not hold off. The headmaster explained to you that any such action on my part means that I require the support you provide all the more, to offset the impulses such actions cause."

Harry gazed ahead, his thoughts jumbled. "I guess it's just hard for me to understand. It's such a different world that you live in when you deal with Death Eaters, what you have to deal with every day. I know I can't use normal standards of moral behavior with you. I don't know what to think."

Snape nodded. "Understandable, as my experience is substantially different from anything you know, or are used

to. The headmaster told you that he did Legilimens on me from time to time, to check on my emotional state; I think the time has come that it is a good idea for you to do so."

"Why?" asked Harry, very surprised.

"Because it is my emotional state that is of particular interest to you right now," Snape explained. "Because he did so, the headmaster understood my emotional state, and I believe this was helpful to him. Especially in circumstances such as this, I believe it will be helpful to you as well."

Harry could see Snape's point, but he was still surprised. "Okay. What should I look for?"

"It will assist you if I actively recollect the memory as you cast the spell," said Snape. "The first one will be from this morning, as I read the Prophet over breakfast. I suggest it because it is very ordinary; it will give you a baseline, a point for comparison to anything else you see."

Nodding, Harry took out his wand. He cast the Legilimens spell, and focused on trying to access Snape's mind. He got in effortlessly, and found the memory immediately, due to Snape's help, he was sure.

Snape was sitting at a table in his quarters, which were as spartan as his office. His breakfast was sausage, eggs, toast, and orange juice. He was reading an article about who would be the next Minister of Magic, titled "Bright Future For Rudolphus Seen As Field of Contenders Narrows To Two." Harry recognized the article as the one Hermione had read him a little of that morning.

What Harry noticed most of all, however, was the emotional atmosphere that pervaded the scene. 'Dismal' was the first word to come to Harry's mind. Harry imagined that this

would be how he would feel if nothing good had happened for years and years, and never would again. He remembered feeling something similar sometimes when he was a child living at 4 Privet Drive, but nowhere near this strongly. The breakfast felt the same, the newspaper, the plans for the day... even if something interesting happened, it wouldn't be anything good. Good things weren't possible, because they interfered with what needed to be done: the Dark Lord had to be defeated.

Harry viewed the memory for about a minute before withdrawing. His eyes widened a little as he looked at Snape. That's what it's like for you? asked Harry silently. That's normal? Harry associated the feelings he had experienced with profound... it felt like being depressed; different, but similar. Worse, in the sense that it would never go away.

"The next one is ready, when you are," said Snape. "It is a week ago Saturday, in the afternoon, just after my session with you. It was the first time I saw the Dark Lord after Skeeter's death."

Harry waved his wand, and saw Snape standing in front of a door. Harry could feel Snape organize his thoughts, asserting total control of his mind. He felt Snape feel adrenaline rushing through him. Snape concentrated, then opened the door and entered the room.

Voldemort was standing in the middle of the room, his expression as Harry remembered it: haughty and cold, as if the presence of others was a thing to barely be tolerated. Snape stopped a few feet away from Voldemort, knelt, and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes. He then retreated a step and stood. "My Lord," he said; Harry wondered if the words were part of the ritual that included kissing the robes.

"Snape," said Voldemort casually, with an air of indifference. "Have you heard about the death of the Skeeter woman?"

"Yes, my Lord. McGonagall informed me this morning."

Voldemort looked at Snape, seemingly looking through him. "It must have been very annoying that she managed to escape you when you dispatched Fudge."

"Yes, my Lord, it was. I apologize again for my failure--"

Voldemort waved a hand magnanimously. "You did not know she was an Animagus, nor did most of us. The young Malfoy should have been more forthcoming with information he should have known would be of assistance. 'Oh, I forgot,'" said Voldemort mockingly, rolling his eyes. "He will not forget next time, I am sure, once he returns to us. I will have to be more careful about accepting those who are too young." He looked at Snape again with the same penetrating gaze. "It would be understandable, Snape, if you decided to take a little initiative regarding the Skeeter woman. One does not like to leave loose ends."

"Indeed not, my Lord. I would have been pleased to do so, but of course I would not--"

"Have done so without my instructions, yes," interrupted Voldemort lazily. "It is at times like this that it occurs to me what a skilled Occlumens you are." The last was said casually, with an undercurrent of threat.

The meaning was obviously not lost on Snape. "My mind is always open to you, my Lord."

"Yes, it is," said Voldemort, as if conceding a point. "Her death was certainly made to appear as though done by a Death Eater. What is your speculation?"

"My best guess, my Lord, is an Auror, acting without authorization. Likely one of those who is close to Potter. I recall that Potter disliked Skeeter, and his friend Granger even more so. I know that is insufficient motive; there may be more that I do not know. Also pointing to an Auror is that the perpetrator Apparated and reached a Portkey without being caught, indicating some Apparation skill, and the fact that Aurors would have enough access to Potter to use some of him to make Polyjuice Potion."

Voldemort looked thoughtful. "If it was done on Potter's behalf, do you think he authorized or sanctioned it?"

"No, my Lord. He is far too squeamish about such things; recall that he stopped Black and Lupin from killing Wormtail."

"Yes, very true. I never did properly thank him for that. Well, one day. Speaking of which, I am considering the possibility of taking more direct action against Potter. There may come a time when I ask you to do it yourself, to find a way to take him by surprise and eliminate him, then leave Hogwarts. What do you think?"

Surprise showed on Snape's face. "I would be pleased, my—"

"Yes, I know, Snape, we all would be," said Voldemort in exasperation. "Perhaps I should have been more specific. I would like your opinion of the idea, strategically."

Snape thought for a moment. "It comes down to the assessment of him as a future threat, my Lord. If he is truly dangerous, then it might be worth it. If he is a mere annoyance, then it is not. My opinion, on balance, leans slightly in the direction of the idea that it should not be done. I could easily become the Hogwarts headmaster, and

so could be highly useful. Surely there is someone else who could kill him."

"One would think so, but apparently not," said Voldemort, annoyed. "The mere fact of his continued survival does speak to his being a future threat. However, your point about being headmaster is well taken; I probably would have already decided to have you do it if not for that. Very well, Snape. You may withdraw."

"Thank you, my Lord," said Snape, and turned and left the room. Harry could feel Snape's mind relaxing, no longer intently focused on concentrating. His own concentration lessening, Harry withdrew from Snape's mind, refocusing on his current physical surroundings.

"Why did you show me that?" asked Harry. "It was interesting, but I don't see what it has to do with understanding your emotional state."

"As you saw in the first memory, my life is usually not all that interesting," explained Snape with dry understatement. "An encounter with the Dark Lord is the highlight of my day, of my week. Not because it is enjoyable, obviously, but because it is a challenge, and it is what I endure the rest of the time to be able to do. It requires my full effort and concentration, and reminds me of my usefulness and importance. Perhaps you could see it as analogous to a Quidditch match, or the Triwizard tasks."

"And so, for you, that's as close as anything can come to being enjoyable," Harry surmised.

"Yes, exactly. Except for those things I would find truly enjoyable—violence, Schadenfreude, and so forth—that I must do my best to eschew, as you know. The emotional atmosphere you saw in the first memory was largely absent

in the second, as all aspects of my consciousness were focused on the task."

Harry now understood Snape's purpose in showing him the memory, but he wondered about something else. "You said that your mind was open to him, and he seemed to agree. How do you keep all this from him, but still have him think that he can look at anything in your mind?"

"Occlumency is a skill at which I truly excel," said Snape, as Harry wondered if Snape could feel an emotion such as pride. "I am able to separate different types of memories into... sections of my mind, if you will. When I am in the Dark Lord's presence, I place those memories I do not wish him to see in one particular area, and wall it off, in a sense, with Occlumency; it becomes like a false wall which looks like the true one. He can see any memory I choose to allow him to see, and he believes there are no others."

Harry was impressed. "And he has no idea that you can do... well, I guess not, since you'd be dead otherwise. Did you show me that particular memory because of the parts that had to do with me?"

Snape nodded. "Yes, and to show you that I took a certain risk vis-à-vis the Dark Lord in killing Skeeter; he would have been most displeased had he discovered that I had done it, his mention of it being 'understandable' notwithstanding."

"He was sort of trying to lure you into admitting it, if you had done it," guessed Harry.

"To an extent, but he also did it to call up any potential memory I might have of having done it; he was searching me with Legilimens as he said it," said Snape. "But as to that which had to do with you, here we see the first benefits of my having been named deputy headmaster. If he gave me

the instruction to kill you and leave Hogwarts, I could only put him off for so long. It would be necessary to stage an attempt on your life, fail, be arrested, and then 'escape.' I could still function as a spy for the Order, though with more difficulty. As I am so close to becoming headmaster, however, he is reluctant to use me in such a manner. Even so, he is seriously considering it, and he knows there is a time limit; after you graduate, I will not have access to you as I do now unless you stay on as Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, which he cannot afford to assume you will. As you saw, I am trying to discourage him without being too obvious. I have discussed this with the headmistress; if it appears that he will do this, she will feign a serious illness in the hope that this will dissuade him."

"Because it would make it more likely that you'd be headmaster," Harry said, thinking aloud.

"There are two more memories I wish to show you," said Snape, as Harry had almost forgotten Snape's original reason for showing him what he had just seen. Harry nodded, and cast Legilimens again.

He saw Snape sitting in the chair opposite Harry, as he currently was; Harry realized that he was seeing the memory which Snape had covered with the Memory Charm, from Snape's point of view. He saw Snape viewing Harry's recollection of the meeting with Skeeter. When Skeeter mentioned the possibility of revealing Harry's relationship with Snape, Harry felt Snape experience a start, then a thrill of anticipation. Snape had realized instantly that he would have to kill Skeeter; he did not even debate it in his mind, so obvious a conclusion was it. Snape felt a rush of fear; Harry didn't understand why at first. Exploring the feeling, he suddenly understood: Snape had already killed Fudge, experiencing both the thrill of the kill, then the aftereffects

as he tried to recover from the impulse to continue along that path. Snape knew it would be very difficult to recover from that again, coming so soon after the other one, but he also knew he had no choice.

Snape viewed the memory again, formulating a plan as he did so. Harry felt Snape's disdain and frustration with him at his not having reported the information to McGonagall immediately, and the realization that it had an unintended benefit: Snape would not have to get McGonagall's prior approval to do what he knew needed to be done. Harry then felt Snape's annoyance in advance at Harry's predictable reaction upon finding out: he would be angry, self-righteous about having been manipulated to facilitate a murder, feel betrayed and moralistic without a proper understanding of the larger issues. Harry would be ruled by his immediate emotions, Snape knew. But he felt Snape also realize that Harry could not help it, being only seventeen, and Snape understood that he himself would not have done much better at controlling his emotions at that age. Snape did not have sympathy for Harry, but a rational understanding that Harry was often pushed to his limits emotionally, as he was simply by doing what he did to help Snape, and that Harry was doing the best he could. This did not mitigate Snape's annoyance, but it added a perspective to it.

Harry withdrew from Snape's mind again, and thought for a minute, Snape remaining silent. "You let me see that so I'd know that when you decided to do that, you weren't saying to yourself, 'Oh, good, I get to kill someone,'" Harry speculated.

"Crudely put, but accurate," Snape agreed. "I knew it would be a trial. Are you ready to view the last memory?" Harry nodded. "This occurs shortly after I awoke last Saturday morning, the day after I killed Skeeter."

Casting the spell, Harry saw and felt Snape lying in bed, in his quarters. Emotions overwhelmed him; Harry felt Snape feel a powerful need, a longing. He wanted to kill, he wanted to cause someone to suffer; not to do so was almost physically painful. He saw an image in Snape's mind; for a second, Snape was fantasizing about torturing a house-elf. He could see the elf screaming in Snape's mind's eye. With a conscious, painful effort, Snape shut off the thought. I must focus, Snape thought. Harry saw images of Dumbledore, echoes of past sessions in Dumbledore's mind. Harry felt Snape need to call him, but decide not to for fear that Harry would find a morning session so unusual that he would wonder why, and perhaps piece together that Snape had killed Skeeter. Harry realized that Snape knew that if Harry figured it out, his emotional reaction would be such that he would be unable to help Snape, and Snape desperately needed his help. Snape knew he had to wait until the afternoon, at a more normal time. It was important that Harry not find out until Snape had recovered from this. From this thought Snape momentarily slipped into another fantasy of cruelty, then came out of it after a few seconds. It was almost a continual, constant effort not to have such thoughts. Snape looked at a clock on the wall. Six hours, he thought, six hours until I can safely call Potter. I must hold on...

Filling up with emotion, Harry put away his wand. This is what he would go through all the time, thought Harry, if I wasn't helping him. He wouldn't be able to do it, he couldn't withstand that kind of pressure indefinitely. He'd eventually let go, sink into the fantasies, and his personality would be so different that he couldn't be a professor, he couldn't deal with people correctly. He knew this would happen when he killed Skeeter; he would rather not have, but he did it because it had to be done. What must it be like, thought Harry in despair, to live like that all the time.

Harry looked up to see Snape looking at him, apparently understanding what was going on in his head. "The first time the headmaster saw me in that state, he wept openly." Harry found that he could easily believe it. "It is usually not nearly that acute, of course; that is almost as bad as it has ever been. I had not killed for a very long time, and to have to do so twice in one week was... very stressful."

There's an understatement, thought Harry. He sat silently for a minute, trying to process all he had seen and felt. "You showed me all that because you wanted me to know how it looks from your perspective," said Harry.

"Yes, that is right," agreed Snape. "You were inclined to judge me, and if you were going to, it was better that you had more information with which to do so. The headmaster once related to me a Muggle saying: 'Do not judge a man until you have walked a mile in his shoes.' It seems appropriate to this situation."

Harry found it hard to argue with that. He was still convinced that killing was wrong, and still wouldn't have condoned Skeeter's murder, but he found that his conviction was starting to waver. He knew that Snape was right about Ginny being willing to put morality aside to save his life, as she had said as much, and he wondered if he would for her. He suspected he would.

"Well... I guess I have a lot to think about," said Harry, not quite sure that he knew what to say, but feeling that he should leave. "I feel like I need some time to deal with all this. If you don't mind, I mean, if you'll be all right, I wondered—"

"I expected that you would require some time to process what has happened," said Snape. "I have recovered now,

and my need is no more than usual. Take what time you feel necessary, though more than a week would not be advisable. Signal me when you feel ready to resume."

Harry nodded, stood, and left Snape's office, heading for his quarters. His mind was such a blur of thoughts that he barely noticed where he was going, and looked up to see that he was in front of his quarters. He entered, and Ginny and Hermione got up and turned to face him. He walked to Ginny and hugged her, holding her tightly. He continued holding her for far longer than he usually would. Over her shoulder, he saw Hermione looking at him with sympathy. He finally released Ginny, and they walked over to the sofa and sat down together, his arm still around her, as Hermione resumed her seat in the chair.

He told them what had happened, taking about ten minutes. Finishing, he said, "It's just amazing, the way he lives his life. I really felt like crying. It's so... barren, I guess. I guess that's why I hugged you like that when I got here," he added, looking at Ginny. "It just made me feel so lucky to have you, and you," looking at Hermione, "and the rest. I'm very lucky, I just usually don't think about that so much."

Ginny pulled him into another hug, which he returned gratefully. "I love you," she said. "We all do. I suppose you are lucky, we all are, to have each other. But keep in mind, everyone's lucky compared to him. He lives in worse circumstances than... is possible to imagine, I'd think. But I see your point. Just a little while of seeing how he lives made you need a hug, but he has to deal with it all the time."

"Did it affect how you feel about what he did?" asked Hermione.

"That's the big question, isn't it," said Harry. "In some ways, yes, and in some ways, I'm not sure. I still wouldn't support Skeeter's murder, but seeing the situation from his perspective made it seem less like a murder and more like... something unpleasant that needed to be done. But it definitely makes me feel differently about how I feel about him doing it, and its connection with my relationship with him. When I first realized he did it, I think I felt like, he's a cold-blooded killer, and I'm helping him, how can I do that? Now it doesn't seem like that. In some ways that's not right, because I wouldn't see it that way if he'd killed someone close to me. But... I don't know, the whole thing's so confusing sometimes. I'm not sure what to think."

"Maybe the best thing is not to think too much about it right now," suggested Hermione. "You should probably let it rest for a while, your unconscious will work on it. It'll seem clearer at some point."

"Is that the way it worked for you, with your thing?" asked Harry, curious.

"I don't know, since I wasn't able to stop thinking about it," responded Hermione with a self-deprecating smile. "Do as I say, not as I did. Neville did manage to distract me sometimes, though."

"Good point, I was just thinking of distracting Harry," said Ginny with a grin at Harry, one whose meaning he had come to understand clearly.

"Oh, speaking of that," said Hermione, suddenly uncomfortable, "I thought you should know... you know I finally got into Harry's mind, that's how I found the Memory Charm. Before that happened, I, um..."

"You saw something," Ginny supplied, not sounding bothered. "What?"

"Jumping in the deep end," said Harry. "The robes."

"Ah," said Ginny. "What did you think?"

"It was very nice," said Hermione sincerely.

"Really?" asked Ginny, sounding very pleased. "To be honest, I've never thought my body was all that great, but I'm really glad that you like it."

"No, um, what I meant was..." started a flustered Hermione, who stopped speaking upon seeing Ginny's wide, mischievous smile. Harry burst out laughing as Hermione smiled, recognizing that she'd been had. Shaking her head humorously, she stood and said, "Well, I think I'd better go, so you can use that nice body of yours to distract Harry."

"Definitely one of its best uses," agreed Ginny.

Still smiling, Hermione said, "See you later," and left their quarters.

Harry leaned over to kiss Ginny, then chuckled. "That was so great... thanks, I really needed a good laugh."

"I love to make you happy," she said. She stood and took his hand, pulling him up. "Come on, I'll make you even happier."

"When you first mentioned that, my first thought was, I'm not sure if I'm in the right frame of mind for that sort of thing," he replied, but let himself be pulled up.

She started leading him to the bedroom. "Of course, that's part of the whole point of distraction," she explained, as if it

were obvious. "It's to get you out of this frame of mind and into a different, better one."

"Ah, I see," he replied, again feeling very lucky to have her.

Back at the Burrow, the six gathered in the living room. Harry told them that Snape had killed Skeeter, but explained that he couldn't tell them how he had found out. He decided it was best not to mention the Memory Charm as well. Ron, Neville, and Pansy were surprised. "I thought he was ruled out as a suspect because he couldn't have known what she was threatening," said Ron. "How did he find out?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that, either," said Harry.

Ron tried to rein in annoyance. "How about if you just mime it for us?"

Harry chuckled at the idea, but Pansy responded, "Ron, he tells us what he can. You know he would tell us all of it if he could."

"I know, I didn't mean anything like that," said Ron defensively. "It's just..."

"Hard to know some things, but not everything," finished Harry. "I understand, I know how you feel. Not much I can do, unfortunately. At least now we know who did it and why, we don't have to wonder anymore."

"Seems kind of strange, though," mused Pansy. "My Head of House is someone who kills people..."

"Only if he has to, though, and he felt he had to," clarified Harry. "And remember, McGonagall said that she would have done it if she was convinced that Skeeter would talk about

what she'd seen. He just wasn't willing to take as many chances as her."

Ron looked thoughtful. "D'you suppose Dumbledore ever killed?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "I should ask him. I doubt it, though. You saw the chances he was willing to take to respect Malfoy's rights. It's hard to imagine circumstances where he'd kill."

"Who knows, maybe he did kill, and that's why he became like he was, not willing to take even a tiny step towards doing the wrong thing," suggested Pansy.

"Is that the kind of thing you can just ask him, though?" wondered Ron. "Say, Albus, did you ever kill anyone?"

"It would have been harder to do when he was still alive, or as he would say, when he was still physical," said Harry. "But even then, he would have answered, because it's an important question. Now, especially, he has no embarrassment or hesitation in talking about anything. Of course, I don't have to ask him, because we're talking about him, so he's watching, and he'll answer the question without my asking again."

"So, is it not only people where Albus is, but also people who've moved on," asked Ron, "who can—"

Ron was cut off by a face suddenly appearing in the fireplace; it was Dentus. "Archibald!" exclaimed Harry in surprise.

"Hello, Harry, everyone," said Dentus. "Sorry to interrupt. Harry, there are a few things that I'd like to discuss with you,

if you have a few minutes. Could you come over here for a bit?"

"Sure," agreed Harry. "I'm not busy."

"You're welcome too, Hermione, if you're free," suggested Dentus. She nodded. "Okay, I'll be expecting you." His head vanished from the fireplace.

"Wonder if it's about Minister of Magic-related news," said Harry to Hermione.

"Wait, is this such a good idea?" asked Ron, concerned.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"I'm sorry, Neville," said Ron, "but let's remember what happened the last time one of us got an unexpected request to go to someone else's fireplace."

Looking somber at the reminder, Neville nonetheless said, "It's okay, Ron, I understand. You have a good point. We have to be careful."

"They just did that a few weeks ago," Harry said dismissively. "I don't think they're going to do the same thing again so soon. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Yeah, I think the last time you said something like that was when Pansy signaled you to warn you about Goyle," retorted Ron.

Harry's eyebrows went up, as did a few others'. "So, just because of that, all of a sudden my judgment is suspect?"

Raising his voice, Ron responded, "When it comes to your safety, yes, your judgment is highly suspect, as far as I'm

concerned."

Harry stared at Ron, who glared back, defiant. It suddenly occurred to Harry what motivated Ron's attitude; he remembered their conversation on Ron's birthday after they had discovered that Snape had searched the Slytherins' belongings. His expression softening, he nodded. He looked at the still-angry Ron with affection. "Thank you, Ron. I love you, too."

The girls smiled, and Ron looked at Harry as if trying to be sure that Harry wasn't being sarcastic. "Now you're just trying to butter me up, make up with me," said Ron in the same vein, calming down.

"I get your point, my track record with this isn't so great," Harry conceded. "But it's not going to happen. It's not common knowledge that Archibald talks to me, I think only one of his contacts knows. It's not the kind of thing that could get back to Death Eaters. Really, it'll be all right."

Ron was obviously not satisfied. "Look, tell you what. You go ahead and go, but we'll have the same system the Aurors do when they go out on calls. The second you arrive, look at your hand; if you don't, we'll be there in as long as it takes to grab Fawkes' tail. And even if it looks okay, be on guard. Don't let him get behind you, and check him out with Legilimens."

Harry looked unhappy. "I don't know for sure that I'm good enough yet to check like that without the person knowing I'm doing it."

"He knows what happened to Neville and me," pointed out Hermione. "I think he'd understand why you were being extra careful."

"Okay," Harry sighed. "Ready, Hermione?" She nodded, and he approached the fireplace. He went through, and before he could regain his balance coming out of Dentus's fireplace, he was hit with a Stunning Spell.

The first thing Harry saw upon regaining consciousness was a Killing Curse shield flicking off around him. Reflexively reaching for his wand, Harry took in what was happening. His five friends were in the center of the room, dueling with Death Eaters. Harry looked up to see Voldemort send Neville flying across the room as Harry's other friends started to crumple and fall to the ground, obviously victims of a Voldemort area-effect spell. Singing, Fawkes flew around from Death Eater to Death Eater, harassing them and obstructing their vision.

Not sure why he was doing it, Harry pointed his wand at Voldemort and sent out an energy beam, the same one he had used to disrupt Voldemort's wall of energy in their encounter a month ago. Voldemort looked up in surprise and tried to block the beam, but it continued its progress, and hit its target. Voldemort crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Harry Summoned Voldemort's wand and cast the spell that would wrap him in ropes. As the ropes started to whirl around the prone Voldemort, to Harry's shock, Voldemort simply vanished.

"Dammit!" Harry yelled in frustration, then turned his attention to the rest of the room. He ran to the center, where his friends were starting to recover from the effects of Voldemort's spell, doing their best to defend themselves from incoming spells as they did so. Focusing intently, Harry shot off Stunning Spells, taking down two Death Eaters in quick succession before being forced to ward off incoming spells as the remaining Death Eaters focused their attention on him. Popping noises filled the air as Aurors started

Apparating in; Harry realized that they had probably been trying, but had been stopped by a Voldemort anti-Apparation field, which was now gone, since Voldemort was. Vastly relieved—his friends were still on the ground, and he knew he couldn't have held off six Death Eaters for more than a few more seconds—Harry put down an anti-Disapparation field, then turned his attention back to the fight. He got off two more Stunning Spells before there was no one left to fight, as the Aurors had quickly overwhelmed the Death Eaters with superior numbers; there were now twelve Aurors, and more continued to arrive.

"Fan out!" shouted Kingsley, and groups of two Aurors raced into adjacent rooms. Harry checked his friends, struggling to their feet, but all were all right. He asked them, "Where's Archibald? Is he all right?"

"We don't know," said Neville, rubbing his shoulder. "All we saw when we got here was Death Eaters."

"In here!" shouted an Auror from the kitchen. Harry ran in behind Kingsley to see a dazed-looking Dentus sitting at the kitchen table. Kingsley waved his wand, and Dentus blinked, appearing to come out of whatever haze he had been in. He looked around the room and saw something that Harry hadn't seen yet: his wife on the floor, face up. Dentus got up and moved quickly to her, as did Kingsley, who checked for a pulse at her neck. He looked at Dentus sadly and shook his head. Sitting on the floor, Dentus took his wife's hand and bowed his head; Harry could not see his face.

Grief overwhelming him, Harry stepped forward. Kingsley stood and walked toward Harry. He took Harry's arm, steering him away from Dentus, to the other side of the large kitchen. Their backs to Dentus, Kingsley whispered to Harry. "I know what you want to say to him. That you're sorry, that

it's your fault, that it wouldn't have happened if not for you." Kingsley could obviously tell from Harry's face that he was right. "He doesn't need to hear that right now, Harry. It's not going to do him any good. He's in shock, anyway, he wouldn't be able to process much of anything you said. Remember how you were after Sirius died, nobody could have talked to you, especially right away. He needs time. But even after he recovers, it's not going to help him for you to tell him it was your fault. Both of them had to have known the risks. This is because of Voldemort, not you." He steered Harry again, toward the living room.

They met a group of six Aurors and Harry's friends. "Dentus is all right," said Kingsley. "His wife is dead." Harry's friends looked at him with intense sorrow as he struggled not to lose his composure. He felt Ginny take his hand and Fawkes settle on his shoulder. Kingsley spoke to another Auror quietly, then turned to Harry. "I'd like you all to come with me to the Auror area at the Ministry, the room you went to after the department store attack. It has a Pensieve. Is everyone okay to do that?" Staring straight ahead, Harry nodded numbly. Kingsley Disapparated, and then his friends did, one by one, then finally he did as well.

Memories of the department store attack flooded into Harry as he looked around the room. Ginny stepped over to him and hugged him tightly, and he felt the tears start to come. He sobbed into her shoulder as she held him. "It's not your fault," she said quietly but firmly. "It's not, it's not." He didn't respond; after a few seconds, he stopped, and was handed tissues by Hermione. Pansy took his hand for a few seconds, giving him a look that reinforced what Ginny had said.

"Who should give the memory?" asked Kingsley.

The others exchanged glances. "It should be one of you four," said Hermione. "You got there before I did, or about the same time."

"I'll do it, I've used it before," said Pansy. She walked over and put her memories into the Pensieve. Harry forced himself to put aside his grief long enough to watch what had happened. He put a finger into the Pensieve, as did the others.

They were in the Burrow living room, and Harry saw himself enter the fireplace. Hermione threw in the Floo powder, said the name of her destination, and stepped in. As she did so, Ron whirled his wand and said, "Fawkes." Fawkes appeared; Ginny stared at her left hand. Neville and Ron grabbed the tail feathers while Pansy held onto Ron, and Ginny, Neville. A look of panic and alarm suddenly came to Ginny's face. "Go!" she shouted.

They were in Dentus's living room. A Killing Curse was on the way to Harry's unconscious form, on the floor near the fireplace. Ron instantly pointed his wand at Harry, and the green shield went up. Watching, Harry thought that the Curse was so close to him that the shield should have been too late, but obviously it wasn't. A half-second later Hermione stepped out of the fireplace, and immediately ran to the center of the room to join the others, who were already engaging the Death Eaters; Harry could now see that there were six Death Eaters and Voldemort. Neville engaged Voldemort, and the others took on individual Death Eaters, none of whom Harry recognized. The Killing Curse shield lingered for a few seconds, and Harry saw himself awaken just as it disappeared. Then he saw himself point the wand at Voldemort and send out the energy beam, and wondered again why he had done it. He felt Fawkes trying to send him impressions, and tried to clear his mind so he

could make sense of them. He saw an image of Dumbledore, in the phoenix place as he usually saw Dumbledore in his sleep. Is Fawkes trying to tell me that Albus caused Voldemort's unconsciousness? he wondered. He waited for further impressions.

Kingsley played the memory again, but Harry barely paid attention; he was more interested in what Fawkes was trying to tell him. They all left the Pensieve.

"Well, I have several questions, but let's start with the big one," said Kingsley. "Harry, what did you do to Voldemort? What was that beam?"

"I don't know why I did it," said Harry, trying to concentrate. "I just did it. Can you give me a minute? Fawkes is trying to tell me something." Kingsley nodded, and the room was silent. As Harry finally understood what Fawkes was trying to communicate, Harry's mouth opened in astonishment. The others looked at him with anticipation.

"I think... I'll know for sure later, when Fawkes can tell me in a way that takes longer and is more accurate, but... I'm pretty sure he's trying to tell me that he's in communication with Albus!"

The others gaped in amazement. "Are you sure?" asked Kingsley.

"Pretty sure," said Harry. "I'll know for certain tonight, of course. Here's what I think happened, from what I got from Fawkes. Albus communicated to Fawkes that he wanted me, as soon as I regained consciousness, to do what I ended up doing. Fawkes sent me the impression that it would be a good thing to do, as strongly as he could. When I awoke, the feeling was in my mind so strongly that I just did it, I didn't

even think about it. What I don't know is how Albus managed to communicate with Fawkes."

"And he communicated a way for you to knock out Voldemort?" asked Kingsley.

"No, that's the strange thing. If I'm understanding Fawkes correctly, and I'm pretty sure I am—if I was wrong, I'd be getting feelings telling me I was—what I did, that beam, had nothing to do with what happened to Voldemort. That was Albus, the same as last time. The reason he wanted me to do that is that he wants Voldemort to think I was the one who did it to him last time, that I can do that to him any time I want to, if I get close enough."

Kingsley shook his head in awe. "And that is what he'll think, for sure," he said, half to himself. "Amazing. I don't suppose you know why Voldemort disappeared."

Harry shook his head. "Not exactly, but Albus did predict it. He said that since he incapacitated Voldemort in June, Voldemort would always be certain to have a way to get out of the situation, even if he was made unconscious. It looks like he was right, and that was what we saw."

"One thing I was wondering about," asked Ginny, "was that after Voldemort disappeared, we were fighting those Death Eaters, and Harry came over and started blowing them away, just one Stunning Spell each, I think he ended up getting three like that. Why didn't they have their Protection Shields up, if they were dueling?"

"Yes, I noticed that too," said Kingsley. "I'm pretty sure they did have their shields up. Harry is just very, very strong, and they probably weren't the strongest Death Eaters in the world. A first year can put up a Protection Shield, but if even

an average wizard hits them with a Stunning Spell, the shield won't help much."

There was a silence for a few seconds, then Harry asked, "Had they done the Imperius Curse on Archibald?"

Kingsley nodded. "They obviously killed his wife because she wasn't necessary, but they didn't kill him right away, in case they needed him later. When we found him in the kitchen he was still under the Imperius Curse, but just unfocused, because Voldemort was no longer giving him instructions. I was able to bring him out of it."

"I don't understand how they knew," said Harry. "Archibald said that he only told one other person that he talked to me."

"Remember, Harry, you told me that he does this to politicians and other high-ranking people," said Hermione, "where he goes over their memories and then kills them, blackmails them, or does a Memory Charm. He must have done it either to whoever Archibald told, or Archibald himself. He just... got lucky, and found the connection to you. And he probably decided to do this quickly, since the Hogwarts term starts in a few weeks."

"That makes sense," agreed Kingsley. "Harry, what happened when you arrived at Dentus's fireplace? We didn't see that in this memory."

"I'm not sure, I wasn't really even out yet, but I think it was a Stunning Spell. I think they chose that rather than a Killing Curse because the Killing Curse shield kind of comes on automatically. They must have decided to get me unconscious, then do the Killing Curse. They were probably planning to do the same to Hermione, the other four just got there before they could."

"What made you come, anyway?" asked Kingsley. Neville gave a recap of the conversation that had taken place after Dentus had called. Kingsley nodded and said, "Well done, Ron. The rest of you keep that up, and Harry'll get through this all right. I guess I don't need to tell you at this point that you should consider no fireplace secure. Well, ours, you can. But you should still go out in public, Harry. In fact, you should think about doing it tomorrow, or soon. I'd rather they knew that you weren't going to hide every time something like this happens.

"Also, I was going to tell you tomorrow, you and Neville, we're ready to start your training again. Same schedule as before. Think you'll be ready for Monday?" Neville and Harry exchanged a glance and a nod. "Okay, I'll see you then. I'm going to follow up on this situation, you all should just take the fireplace home." Kingsley Disapparated, and Harry followed his friends to the nearest Ministry fireplace.

Harry was the last through the Burrow fireplace, and as he walked out, he saw Molly already hugging those who had come first. He saw Arthur and, to his surprise McGonagall, sitting in the living room. Molly hugged him and resumed her seat on the sofa; Harry and his friends remained standing, as there weren't enough chairs for everyone to sit.

"One of the Aurors on the scene came directly to me and told me what had happened while Kingsley was debriefing you," explained McGonagall. "Only the broad details, of course, since the action was finished by the time they got there. If one of you would be so good as to relate the details..."

Harry's expression clearly conveyed that he did not want to be the one to do so. Hermione volunteered, and took only a

few minutes to tell the story. Ginny put an arm around Harry, and held him tightly.

As Hermione finished, McGonagall was shaking her head in amazement. "Albus is still full of surprises, I see. Harry, it would be helpful if you would meet Kingsley and I, perhaps at the Auror training area tomorrow, to let us know what Albus tells you about this." Harry nodded. "And, before I leave... Harry, would you sit for a moment?" She indicated an empty spot on the sofa near her chair. Harry sat and faced her, his face expressionless.

"Unless I am very wrong, Harry, you are holding yourself responsible for this, because Voldemort would have had little interest in Dentus but for his connection to you. I assume this connection goes back to March, when the ARA was being debated. At that point, it had been six months since you had defied Voldemort in the loudest and most public way possible, and he had ordered three attempts on your life. I think it is very safe to say that both Dentus and his wife were well aware of any possible risks of being associated with you.

"Voldemort does not target people because of their association with you per se, Harry. He targets them because in working with you, they are working against him. Your only causal connection to this is that you are doing what you should be doing, and you have annoyed him considerably by surviving. I believe Mr. Finch-Fletchley said it very well in the interview after Hogsmeade: that in helping you, one is working against Voldemort, and that is what we all should be doing. There are risks to doing that, as you know very well, as do those who choose to take them. They do so anyway, because they wish to do the right thing. Grieve for them, by all means, but place the blame squarely where it belongs. You know where that is, and it is not with you." She stood,

said goodbye to Arthur and Molly, and exited through the fireplace.

Ginny sat on the sofa next to Harry and hugged him, and he hugged her back. He felt as though he should feel self-conscious because there were so many people in the room, but he didn't, because he felt so close to all of them. Still holding Ginny, he said to everyone, "Part of me understands she's right... it's just really hard right now. I mean, first Neville's grandmother, now this..."

Neville took a few steps to where Harry could see him while holding Ginny. "Harry, I think you know this, but I'm going to remind you anyway. My grandmother was very proud that I helped save you in Hogsmeade, and that I stood by you while you were Voldemort's number one target. She would have rather died the way she did than lived while keeping her head down and telling me to do the same. A lot of people are going to feel that way, and some are going to die. Some people are going to keep their heads down, and they're probably going to live. It's a choice everyone makes. But let me tell you this: if I die helping you, and you so much as blame yourself once, I'll come to that place where you talk to Dumbledore and kick your ass."

Despite how bad Harry felt, he couldn't help but laugh. Even though Neville had shed most of his old shyness, Harry felt there was still something funny about him saying that kind of thing. Feeling very grateful, Harry got up, walked over to Neville, and hugged him. Shoving aside embarrassment, he said, "I love you, Neville."

"I love you too, Harry," said Neville as he patted Harry's back and released him. With the barest hint of a smile, he added, "And thank you for saying that. You had said it to everyone else except me, I was starting to feel bad."

Harry laughed again, along with the others. "Didn't mean to exclude you, Neville, believe me." He sat again, now smiling. "That's the second time now that you've really made me laugh after almost getting killed. Thank you."

"We all do what we can," said Neville, sitting in a chair next to Hermione and taking her hand.

Harry's smile faded, as it came back to him that unlike that occasion, someone had died this time. "I guess this is a little like Hogsmeade, except that in this case, the people knew the risks they were taking. But Albus said it didn't get any easier, and I suppose he's right."

"He also said you'd get through it with our help," said Ginny. "He was right about that, too."

* * * * *

Harry found himself standing in the phoenix place, which was as beautiful as ever. "Another difficult day," said Dumbledore. "You seem to have more than your share of them. Fortunately, you also have more than your share of friends, and love."

"I need it, that's for sure," Harry agreed. "Especially after what I saw today, and what I went through, sometimes I wonder how Professor Snape gets along without that, without anything like that."

"It is very difficult for him, as you now understand better than ever," agreed Dumbledore. "There are several things we should discuss; do you have a preference as to which one is first?"

"Not really, so I guess I'll say, the one about Professor Snape first." Before Harry could ask, Snape's 'other half' appeared.

Harry greeted him, then asked, "The first thing I'm wondering about is, how do you feel about what he did?"

"I try, as do all of us who inhabit this place for whatever length of time, not to make judgments about those in physical form," explained Snape. "It would be so easy for us; this is a highly pleasant environment, free of stress of any kind. For us to point and say 'you should do this' or 'you shouldn't do that' would be demeaning to those whom we would judge."

"You wouldn't even judge murder?" asked Harry, surprised.

"If one observes the principle, no," answered Snape. "One thing which is clearer from where Albus and I reside is that there is no such thing as right and wrong, there are no absolutes. You are experiencing that now, in a way; you are sure that murder is wrong, but it troubles you that there might be reasonable justifications for it in certain circumstances. What if one murder saves a thousand? This is one of the points of life, that we are forced to make such judgments. We must decide what is right and what is wrong. Some things may seem obvious, such as that torturing another for pleasure is wrong. I am not saying it is not wrong, just that there is no universal law that says it is. We decide such things. Some seem quite obvious; some, such as killing Rita, seem less so. I know you would like an opinion to help you decide, but we cannot give it to you. You must simply decide for yourself."

"It's a bit like when you wouldn't give me your opinion on the ARA, isn't it," Harry asked Dumbledore.

"Except that in that situation, I had an opinion; I simply declined to tell you what it was," said Dumbledore. "In this situation, we truly have no opinion. But otherwise, it is

similar, yes. It is important for us to make our own judgments. And as was the case in that situation, you have all the information necessary to make your judgment. I sympathize; some such judgments are very difficult."

Harry thought for a minute, then asked, "Did you ever kill, Albus?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Harry, I did. On one occasion. No doubt you are familiar with my defeat of the Dark wizard Grindelwald, as it is mentioned on my Chocolate Frog card. It was he who I killed."

"Did you regret doing it?"

"Yes, I did," said Dumbledore calmly, as if he were discussing any ordinary subject. "I did not wish to kill, but I ended up deciding to do so, for what I felt was the greater good. Influencing my decision was the fact that six months before his final defeat, I at one point had him in my power. I could have killed him then, but I attempted to capture him instead, and he escaped me. He went on to kill twenty-two more wizards, and perhaps over a hundred Muggles, before I finally defeated him. Needless to say, those deaths weighed heavily on my conscience." Harry's heart went out to Dumbledore. He could put himself in Dumbledore's place all too easily.

"Killing him was one of the hardest things I ever did," Dumbledore continued. "One needs a strong feeling of hate to use the Killing Curse effectively, and that did not come naturally to me. Also highly unpleasant were the aftereffects of having done so. Ironically, though I was hailed as a hero and honored greatly, the six months after I killed him were the most miserable of my life. The scene replayed in my mind many times over, and the sure knowledge that I had

saved lives was of little solace. Despite the twenty-two deaths, after that experience I promised myself that I would never kill again, no matter what the reason or circumstances. Pansy was quite correct in her speculation yesterday; that experience greatly informed my future judgments regarding what was right or wrong.

"In addition to the mental stress of my having killed, I also experienced a severe degradation of my magical abilities. I suddenly could not do difficult spells that I had before, and normal spells less effectively. I was very discouraged by this, and at first attributed it to depression over what I had done; later, I took it as a sign from whatever greater power existed that I should not kill. Of course, after your experience, I realized that I had been using the energy of love, and that putting myself in the proper frame of mind to kill made me unable to use the energy of love, resulting in my abilities becoming far more... ordinary, one could say.

"I developed a set of principles as to how people should be treated, and decided to follow them unwaveringly, no matter the consequences. I knew that this would be quite painful at times, as the twenty-two deaths had been, but I felt it was the right thing to do. Now, I hasten to emphasize that this was simply a judgment I reached, and not necessarily better than anyone else's. One could easily argue that it was less than morally sound, because it led to people suffering when it could have been avoided. For example, Pansy was violently assaulted and tortured when it could have been prevented by my doing what seemed to most to be common sense. You were very nearly killed."

Dumbledore regarded Harry seriously, as if hoping to make sure that Harry took his next words to heart. "You may well reach a different judgment than I did, Harry. You should not think for a moment that any judgment you reach is flawed if

you do so. It may be that if you follow my principles, you may lose one or more of your close friends, while if you do not, they will live. Whatever you choose will be something you must live with, and the consequences could be bad no matter what you choose. Lives will be affected by what you do. As you know, it is a terrible burden. I sympathize with you greatly, and I wish I could give you easy answers. Unfortunately, there are none."

Harry was silent for a minute, thinking. "I understand. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy." He paused again, then said, "I'll have to think about that some more." Turning to Snape, he asked, "Was it hard for him to show me what he did?"

"I do not know if 'hard' would be the right word exactly," said Snape, "but it represented a further deepening of his relationship with you. He could not have done it, say, in the first week after you began. It has now been seven weeks, which while not a long time, is long enough for him to get a very good sense of who you are. He still finds you immature, which was his main concern when this began, but he is very impressed with the emotional resiliency you have shown. Of course he is aware that before your sessions you spend a few minutes developing a state of mind consistent with the use of the energy of love, and he has come to see the similarity of that to the state of mind that Albus almost always had; by that age, it came to Albus naturally, effortlessly. With you it requires an effort, but you do it, and it is a state of mind that he needs you to have, though he did not know this at first. He now realizes that no one but you could have replaced Albus, no matter how willing, as the emotional environment would not have been the same. Never having done it with anyone but Albus, it did not occur to him that it would be such a different experience with a different person. As to what happened yesterday, he knew that it was important

that you see things from his perspective, and he has become comfortable enough with you in this role to do so."

Harry nodded. "Well, I guess that's as much as I could have hoped for, by this time."

"It is quite impressive, really, on his part as well as yours," said Snape. "He had an adjustment to make, and he made it."

"I guess it's easy not to think about how this is for him... or at least it was, until yesterday. I should ask about other stuff, I know we don't have all the time in the world. Albus, did you really communicate with Fawkes?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Yes, I did. It was very nice, like talking to an old friend again after an absence. It simply had not occurred to me that I might be able to do so. It takes a very specific, focused effort, but it can be done. He was very surprised to hear from me, but of course he knew who it was immediately. He was able to quickly convey to you what I hoped you would do."

"That's great," said Harry, happy for Dumbledore. "I'm glad that you'll be able to talk to... well, I guess it's more like, commune with him again."

"Yes, we are both very pleased," agreed Dumbledore. "I will be able to send you messages of a sort, of the same type that Fawkes can convey to you. Detailed communication will have to wait until you are asleep, though it will rarely be necessary to communicate through him in any case. It is good to have this option, of course."

"Why was it so important for me to do that? He already thought I was the one who knocked him unconscious, in June."

"He suspected it, but now he knows, or thinks he does. It was my hope that this will cause him to cease personal participation in any such attacks on you in the future, and perhaps cease participating in any attacks which may draw the attention of the Aurors, since he knows that you are on call for emergencies. He will now be quite frightened of you, the first time in many years he has been frightened of anything. This could very well save lives.

"To respond to the question you are forming, yes, I would have incapacitated him anyway, even if Fawkes had been unable to receive my message. It was very necessary, as you saw that your friends were losing the battle. They would have been rendered unconscious, then shortly killed, as would you have. I had to do it, so I hoped that we could kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. As for the experience itself, it was no less unpleasant than last time, just more familiar."

"I'm really sorry to hear that," said Harry. "I appreciate it, we all do. You saved our lives."

Dumbledore nodded his acknowledgment. "I am pleased to be able to do so, even from where I am. With any luck, events such as yesterday's will slow down or stop entirely."

Harry looked down and shook his head. "A little too late for Archibald," he said.

"Very true," said Dumbledore solemnly. "Which brings me to the next topic." Snape had disappeared about a minute ago; another form appeared, and he quickly recognized it as Sarah Dentus.

She approached him, and he felt emotion rising again. "I'm so sorry—"

She took his hand. "People have been telling you since this happened that it was not your fault. Perhaps if I tell you as well, you will take it more seriously. Harry, we knew very well what risks we were taking, even before you became involved. Archibald knew that the ARA could save lives, but nobody at the Ministry was actively and publicly advocating it, because they were afraid of attracting Voldemort's attention. We were concerned as well, but in the end we decided to take the risk. Later, we knew there was a further risk in his helping you, even if very few people knew, but that decision was a little easier. As Archibald put it at the time, 'He's setting himself up as Voldemort's main target, practically daring Voldemort to try to kill him. How can I decide not to help him when he takes risks like that?' I agreed. We went into this with our eyes wide open. We were simply unlucky. I am very glad that Archibald survived, and that you and your friends did as well. Archibald will miss me greatly, of course, but he will be comforted to know that I am here. We had heard of people communicating from places like this, and wondered whether we would be able to. Now, I will say what I wish to say to him." As she spoke, Harry again felt as though he were intruding on a personal conversation, but was pleased that Dentus's grief would probably be lessened, even if only a little.

The next day, Harry sat down with the others for lunch, just having finished visiting with Dentus for an hour. "How did it go?" asked Molly.

"He was very happy to see Sarah again, of course," said Harry, "but it's so soon that he's still in a bad way about it. I would have given him a few days before trying to talk to him, but I wanted him to see it right away."

"Understandable," said Arthur. "I assume he also told you that it wasn't your fault."

Harry nodded. "Yes, he was really firm about that. I'm beginning to accept it, but... it's like, the good thing about helping me is that when your loved ones die, you get a message from them after they're gone. The bad thing is, your loved ones die."

"A lot of people died sixteen years ago," said Arthur. "A lot were helping Dumbledore, but that doesn't make it his fault. I know you've heard this before, but we're going to keep telling you."

Harry nodded, wondering if they felt that he was wallowing in self-pity by making comments like the one he had just made; he then wondered if he actually was. All he knew was that it was how he felt. Part of him understood that they were right, and part felt that they couldn't understand how he felt. "I know, it's just hard seeing that happen to people you care about."

"It makes sense," said Ginny sympathetically. "You just spent an hour with someone who's still really grieving, it's bound to affect you."

"Well, I was thinking we would go do something this afternoon," suggested Molly. "Kingsley said Harry should get out more anyway, and this would be a good thing to distract him."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a smile. He glanced over at Hermione, who was smiling as well, and looking down, apparently hoping not to be seen. Seeing their expressions, Molly looked at them suspiciously, but offered no comment. "What did you have in mind?" asked Arthur.

"Just a trip to Diagon Alley," said Molly. "Walk around, look in the shops, have a snack at Florean Fortescue's, that sort of

thing. We could get Ginny's N.E.W.T. books while we're there."

"You guys don't need books?" asked Ginny, surprised.

"The N.E.W.T. books cover years six and seven," explained Hermione.

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "Funny how I have lots of older brothers and I didn't know that." She paused slightly before the word 'lots,' and Harry wondered if she was going to say 'six' and changed her mind.

"Well, most of us don't pay attention to that kind of thing," remarked Ron. "I didn't know either, until I got the books. Now, Hermione, on the other hand, probably knew that when she was a first year."

"Third year, actually," said Hermione casually, apparently deciding not to reward Ron with a reaction.

"Oh, right, third year," said Ron, just as casually. "That was when you were taking eighteen classes, right?"

She sighed and gave him an annoyed look. "Yes, Ron. I was taking eighteen classes. Hogwarts only offers twelve, but I was taking eighteen."

Ron shrugged. "Well, you were using a Time-Turner to put more hours into the day. Maybe you were using a Dimension-Door to also go to a different version of Hogwarts where they teach different classes."

Harry failed in his effort not to laugh, as did Neville, Pansy, and Ginny. "Yes, I did, and the Ron in that dimension was much nicer than you," Hermione retorted.

"Ah," said Ron, nodding. "Fancied him, did you?"

"I'm not sure I like the direction this conversation is taking," said Hermione with mock nervousness, as the others laughed again. "Besides, the Dimensional Door doesn't work that way."

"There is such a thing?" asked Ron, surprised. "I was only making it up. Or are you pulling my leg?"

"There is something called a Dimensional Door, yes, or at least there's reputed to be," said Hermione. "I've only heard it mentioned once, in a book I once read about wizarding myths and legends, so it could just be a... well, a myth or a legend. It's supposed to be like, there are two portals, or doors. One is constant, in our dimension, and one moves around to random dimensions, coming back to ours once every X number of months or years. But you couldn't use it like you said, since you can't control where it goes, or how often it goes there."

"Who would have made something like that?" wondered Neville. "Or could have, for that matter?"

"If it's true, it would probably be one of those big mysteries, like who built the Veil of Mystery," suggested Hermione. "But it's probably not true anyway. The book was entertaining, but most of the stuff in it was really dubious. It's stuff that I don't think even Luna's father would publish."

"Really?" asked Ginny. "More dubious than the idea that Cornelius Fudge crushed goblins and had them baked in pies?"

"Okay, I take that back," replied Hermione, conceding the point. "He would publish it."

"Say, now that Fudge is gone, I wonder who gets to use his army of heliopaths," joked Ron.

Not having been present for the meeting at the Hog's Head, Pansy didn't laugh, and neither did Harry, though the others did. "I know she can be strange, but I really do like Luna," said Harry. "I don't know if I want to be making fun of her."

Ron looked chagrined and defensive. "I think we're making fun of the idea of an army of heliopaths and Cornelius 'Goblin-Crusher' Fudge, rather than Luna exactly," he said. "I like her too, I think we all do."

"Did I tell you that she was one of the ones who came to see me, that day in the infirmary?" asked Pansy. The others shook their heads. "I had always made fun of her a lot-she was a pretty easy target-but she was really nice. I apologized for what I had done, and she just brushed it off, saying, 'Oh, don't feel bad, everyone does it,' which made me feel worse. She certainly doesn't hold a grudge."

"No, she definitely has a... serenity, I guess you could say," agreed Hermione.

After a short pause, Molly asked, "So, is everyone all right to go to Diagon Alley?" Harry wondered if the question was directed mostly at him; he nodded along with the others. "Good. I've already told Kingsley we might go, so I'll let him know before we do, and the Aurors will be ready."

As they finished their lunch, they heard a voice coming from the fireplace. Arthur got up to respond, then came back to the table. "Harry, it's for you. Something to do with Quidditch, apparently." Shrugging, Harry got up to answer. The mention of Quidditch having piqued Ron's interest, he too went to the living room, standing in a spot which couldn't be seen from the fireplace.

"Ah, Professor Potter, thank you," said the man, who appeared to be in his fifties, balding, with short brown hair. "I am Alan Woodridge, chairman of the English Quidditch Association. I wonder if I could have a word with you."

Surprised, Harry wondered what it was about. "Sure, go ahead."

"Would it be possible for you to pop over here? I'd prefer to say what I want to say in person, it wouldn't take long."

Harry wondered if he would have seen the potential danger in such a thing twenty-four hours ago. "I'm sorry, Mr. Woodridge, but I really can't be going to anyone's fireplace right now. The Aurors don't want me going to any fireplace that I, or they, don't personally know is secure." He shrugged in apology.

Woodridge looked slightly taken aback, but recovered. "Yes, I see. Ah, well, then... I suppose I can ask you what I want to from here. You probably know, Professor, that—"

"Please, call me 'Harry.'"

"Yes, thank you, Harry. You probably know that as it's held every four years, the Quidditch World Cup is coming around again next summer. As the chairman of the EQA, assembling the team is my responsibility. Qualifying matches begin in a few months, and the process of team member selection will be starting very soon. Most players are chosen from the ranks of professional teams, but we always want to keep our eyes open for players who might help us. My purpose in contacting you is to tell you that we would be interested in considering you to be a member of this year's team."

Harry felt his heart leap, and gaped in surprise. "You want me to be on the English Quidditch World Cup team?" He

involuntarily glanced at Ron, who wore an equally stunned look.

"Well, not exactly; we would like you to try out for the team," clarified Woodridge. "You might very well not make it; I don't want to raise your hopes." Harry was suddenly struck by a feeling that Woodridge wasn't being completely honest, and he reached out with Legilimens. "It's simply that our information is that you are an outstanding Seeker, considering your age. I have talked with your former captain, Oliver Wood, who believes that you would match up well with the Seekers on our professional teams. I would not want to pass up a chance to recruit the best players possible."

Harry could detect nothing in the last few sentences that was untruthful, and wondered if he had imagined it before. He decided to ask a question to determine whether he had. "So you think there's a good chance I might not make the team."

Woodridge shrugged. "I don't know if I'd say, a 'good' chance, but obviously it will be highly competitive. There are twelve highly skilled, professional Seekers in competition, all of whom needless to say would very much like to play on the team. But from what I've heard, you have as good a chance as any of them."

As Woodridge spoke, Harry detected a memory contradicting what he was saying: Woodridge clearly felt that Harry was a certainty to make the team if he tried out. Harry didn't know why, but he had a suspicion. "Mr. Woodridge—"

"Alan, please."

Harry nodded. "Alan, I'm sorry to ask this, but... all my life, a lot of things have happened to me because I'm famous. Is

that part of why you're asking me?"

"No, it is not," Woodridge assured him, and Harry knew instantly that it was a lie; he detected a memory of Woodridge's excitement when Wood had suggested to him that Harry be given a tryout, and Woodridge's understanding that it would be a great publicity coup for English Quidditch to have Harry Potter on the team. "As I said, Oliver Wood felt that you would have as good a chance of making the team as anyone else. I do not want to leave any stone unturned in order to put the best team on the field. And there will be reserves, of course. Even if you were not the starting Seeker, we will have at least one and possibly two reserve Seekers; you know very well how dangerous it can be to be a Seeker."

Harry detected that Woodridge did not necessarily plan to make him the starting Seeker; having him on the team would be good enough, though he would get the nod if he was fairly close in ability to the best of the professional players. He wondered if his disappointment showed on his face, which he tried to keep expressionless. "Yes, I do know that. It just seems like I'm awfully young to play at that level."

"You will be eighteen by the time of the finals, assuming we make it that far; you may recall that Viktor Krum was only seventeen when he played, brilliantly, for Bulgaria in the final three years ago. Your age is obviously no impediment, as there is precedent for one so young to play at that level."

Harry had to concede that that was true. "I guess so. Well, obviously, it would be fantastic to play on the English team. But I'd have to think about whether it's something I could do or not. As you may know, I'm going to be both a teacher and a student this year, and I'd have very little free time to join

team practices; I assume there'd be a lot of them. Also, I'm concerned about security. You probably know that being around me isn't exactly safe, and I hate to think about the danger that my being around could bring to the team."

Woodridge nodded sympathetically. "It's good of you to be concerned about that. But we do have private security arrangements; we would have them anyway, as the team will be very high-profile, and for that reason a possible target even if you were not on it. As for the time situation, Wood did explain that to me, and it is a concern. But you do practice quite a bit at Hogwarts, he tells me, and it's more important that you practice at all than where you do it, exactly. You know that for Chasers and Beaters it's important to practice with the rest of the team, but Keepers and Seekers mostly operate alone. You would practice with us when you could, but what would be more important would be simply that you keep in practice."

Harry doubted that such arrangements would be made for any other player, no matter how skilled. He also doubted that whatever 'private' security wizards Woodridge used would be anywhere near as competent as Aurors, and he still felt he would bring a great deal of danger to the team if he joined. "I understand. When would the tryouts be?"

"The first weekend of September," replied Woodridge. He looked at Harry intently. "Is this not something you want to do, Harry? You seem hesitant, and most Quidditch players would be jumping at the chance."

"I would love to do it," said Harry truthfully. "If Voldemort weren't around, and if I weren't both a teacher and a student, then I would probably be jumping at it. But there's just so much going on... I just have to think about it a bit."

"I understand," said Woodridge, and Harry detected that he didn't really understand, but was saying it to be polite.

"Well, you think it over, then, and let me know what you decide." He said goodbye, and withdrew from the fireplace.

Harry looked across the room and saw that the others, including Molly and Arthur, were standing near the kitchen so they could hear the conversation, no doubt having been alerted by Ron. Ron walked up to Harry as Harry approached the others. "Are you crazy?" asked Ron incredulously. "Why wasn't your answer 'yes, yes, thank you, tell me where to go and I'll be there?'"

Harry's face and tone now reflected his frustration. "He was lying, Ron. About my chances of making the team. He wants me on the team, badly, because of the publicity. If I don't fall off my broom repeatedly during tryouts, I'm sure to make the team."

"Well, then, what's the..." Ron trailed off as he suddenly understood.

"You want to be on the team, but you don't want to make it like that," said Ginny.

Harry nodded. "He lied about making the team, and he lied about it not mattering that I'm famous. And he lied a little when I brought up the danger; he knows I'd increase the danger, but he just doesn't care; he's willing to risk it to have me on the team."

"But you're good, Harry!" protested Ron. "You might make the team anyway! You know very well that Wood didn't suggest you because you're famous. He plays professionally, and if he says you're good enough to compete for the position, then you are."

"But what if I was the seventh or eighth-best Seeker, and they chose me anyway? I'd be taking a spot from someone who deserved it more. And if I weren't the famous Harry Potter, he wouldn't even be asking me, I'm sure of that."

"That doesn't mean you wouldn't deserve it, though," pointed out Ron. "Look at Krum, he hadn't played professionally before he played for Bulgaria, and he was their starter and led them to the finals! Who's to say you couldn't do the same?"

"I wish you wouldn't say that," responded Harry, sounding more annoyed and louder than he meant to. "I'm tempted enough as it is, to just say yes, to take something I might not deserve."

Ron gave Harry a 'what's wrong with you?' look. "Well, I guess I should just shut up, then, because I don't know what to say except for that." He turned and walked into the kitchen.

Harry was even more frustrated, because he'd managed to upset Ron. He wanted to follow Ron into the kitchen, but felt that it wouldn't be a good idea right then. Embarrassed, he looked at the others, who looked concerned and sympathetic. He headed for the stairs. "I just need to..." He trailed off, and walked upstairs to the boys' bedroom.

He sat on the bed, frustrated and angry with himself. As he thought, he realized he was even more angry with Woodridge. Why couldn't he just take me if I'm good enough and not take me if I'm not?, thought Harry. Do they really need me to make Quidditch more popular? What if I am good enough, and I don't do it, I could miss a chance I'll never get again. But what if I'm not good enough, get on the team anyway, have to play, and embarrass myself or let

down the team? Not to mention that I wouldn't have hardly any time, I'm going to be busy enough as it is, with everything else, plus Snape too... Snape would laugh, if he could laugh, he would when he sees this... poor Harry Potter, already with a wonderful partner, great friends, a good job, whining and feeling sorry for himself because he might get yet another good thing for the wrong reason, while Snape has to struggle to get by every day, no friends, nothing good in his life... yes, he chose the Cleansing, but he's stuck with it now, and there'll be times when he needs me and I'll be off chasing this dream... oh, I envy Krum, he didn't have all this to worry about, he could just be a player, not a teacher, not someone with responsibilities to the Order... he probably didn't have to do hardly any schoolwork anyway, I'm sure Karkaroff didn't make him... wonder what happened to Karkaroff, if Voldemort ever found him, probably got a really nasty death if he was caught...

Harry's thoughts occupied him until he heard the sound of a toilet flushing from the nearby bathroom; he saw Ron walk past the bedroom door on his way back downstairs. "Ron, wait," he said; Ron stopped as Harry stood. "Could you come in here for a minute?" Ron nodded, came in, and sat on his bed, next to Harry's.

"I'm sorry, Ron," said Harry, embarrassed. "I shouldn't have been like that, I know you were just trying to be nice. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Well, there was an attempt on your life yesterday, and the wife of a friend got killed," Ron pointed out. "I know that has nothing to do with this, but it would be pretty strange if it didn't affect your mood, how you react to things. But I admit, I was like, 'what's with him?' You know how sensitivity's one of my real strong points." Ron grinned, and Harry did too, starting to feel better. "But, Hermione was

there to explain it to me, as usual. She said she thinks this is something you always have a problem with, maybe getting things you don't deserve because you're Harry Potter. She reminded me of that conversation we had last year about you not feeling deserving. She thinks this is extra-frustrating for you because it's not clear; you could make the team because of talent or your name, and you wouldn't know which it was, which would taint it for you even if it was really because of talent; you would always wonder."

"Sounds about right. I would never argue with Hermione. And I guess what you said made it worse, because it reminded me of what it could be, if I could just be sure it wasn't because of my name. But I can't be sure, and I feel like it's already tainted, so I just didn't want to hear what you were saying."

Ron nodded sadly. "I didn't get that, of course, but I kind of understand it now. And the worst part is, you are good. If you weren't that good, you could just think, they wanted me for my name but I'll say no because I don't want to embarrass myself. You have to wonder what would have happened if you had this talent but your name wasn't Harry Potter."

Harry shrugged. "I suppose I can console myself with the idea that he never would have asked in the first place if I weren't Harry Potter, so I never would have had the chance to find out." He sighed, then continued, "Hugo once told me that people envy his abilities, but they can be a curse; he gets to see the bad sides of people, the stuff they don't let people see. Lies, anger, desperation, all kinds of stuff like that, stuff he'd rather not see or know, but he can't help it. I just saw a tiny bit of what he was talking about. If I weren't a Legilimens, I would have believed Woodridge, I would have never known he was lying. I could have tried out, made the

team, been really happy and blissfully unaware of the real reason. But no, I have to know the truth."

"So, you're definitely going to say no?" asked Ron, looking as though he was sad in advance at the answer he expected to hear.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure. And it's not only just that stuff, but what I said to him was true, too. I'm going to be so busy anyway; I really shouldn't be on the team unless I can devote full time to it, which I can't. So, I'll just have to be satisfied with doing things like figuring out a way to defeat Voldemort, and helping hundreds of young wizards defend themselves and eventually learn how to use the energy of love."

Ron smiled. "Just the usual stuff."

"And being saved by my friends," Harry added. "Which reminds me, I managed to not even thank you for saving my life. Which you actually did twice, in five minutes. That's pretty impressive."

Ron nodded his acknowledgment. "And the second one, ironically, I couldn't have done if you weren't a Legilimens. So I guess there was a good thing about it after all."

"Yeah, I know there are good things about it, too," Harry admitted. "But that doesn't mean I can't whine about the bad things occasionally." He paused, then chuckled. At Ron's inquiring look, he said, "Eighteen classes..."

Ron chuckled as well. "One of my better ones, I admit. It's funny because it's true, she would've done that if she could've. By the way, Harry, we make fun of Hermione, even though we..." Ron paused, then sighed, "Oh, all right, even

though we love her... it really is hard to get used to saying that... anyway, that bit about the heliopaths--"

"No, I'm sorry about that, too, I didn't mean to say that you were being nasty. I guess I just felt guilty, because unlike with Hermione, it's not the kind of thing we'd say to her face, we don't quite know her that well. I guess one thing I got out of the Skeeter experience is the idea that it's better not to do or say things outside someone's presence that you wouldn't with them around, because they could find out, and it's probably just a better way to be anyway."

"It'd be kind of hard to do that all the time, you couldn't really talk about anybody," pointed out Ron. "But with friends, yeah, I see the point." Ron stopped talking as Hugo peeked into the room. "Hey, Hugo, come on in," said Ron, who gestured Hugo to sit next to him on his bed, and Hugo did.

"Thanks. How are you guys doing?"

"You just ask that to be polite, right?" asked Harry, smiling. "I mean, you know exactly how we're doing."

Hugo shrugged lightly. "True. I guess I just say it because most people do, it's more of a greeting, really. A lot of people say 'how are you?' when they don't really care how you are. Also, in my case, it's interesting to see the answers. A lot of people say 'fine' even when I know they're very far from fine."

"I guess that makes sense," said Harry. "By the way, I wondered about something. Does your ability to detect moods work through walls, or do you have to be on a line of sight, like with Legilimens?"

Hugo looked impressed. "Most people don't think to ask that question, but it's a good one. Strangely, I need a line of sight to tell if someone's lying, but telling a mood works through walls. I have no idea why. I assume you asked because you wondered how I knew it was okay to come up here." Harry nodded. "Yes, when I first got here, I saw that the mood up here was serious, and they told me downstairs what had happened. I am sorry, Harry. Probably there's no one better equipped than me to understand what that feels like for you. I can't tell you how many times I've wished I didn't have this ability. People often react to me in ways that would be equivalent to someone just coming out and saying to you, 'I don't like being around you, Harry, you make me nervous. I wish you would go away.' It's that clear to me. So while I've never been considered for the English Quidditch World Cup team, I have had very similar experiences to what you just had."

"I can believe that," said Harry sympathetically. "Do you mind if I ask, Hugo, are you married?"

"No, I'm not, and it's partly for the reason you're obviously thinking," replied Hugo. "I know you're trying not to use Legilimency on Ginny, or your friends, and let me tell you, it's a very good idea. I have had relationships, but I can't turn my ability off, and it always causes problems. I haven't found a woman yet who can deal with my knowing exactly what she's feeling, all the time. I haven't given up, but it is difficult.

"But I see there's another reason you asked, and that's part of why I came over here. You wondered if I was married because of what happened to Dentus yesterday, you're worried about it happening to me. I really appreciate it, but you needn't worry. You know I know about all kinds of Order stuff, and obviously that makes me a prime target for

Voldemort, if he knew I knew this kind of thing, which he might be able to guess. I have jewelry of the same kind as you do, with a few different properties. For example, mine can detect a Memory Charm being done, and the Aurors would be there right away. Rest assured that I'm very well protected, and I live alone, so there's no one who's likely to suffer from their association with me."

"Thanks for letting me know," said Harry. "Last night I was lying in bed, trying to figure out who this was likely to happen to. All I could think of was you, and Pansy's parents."

"They're already protected, Harry," said Ron. "After Neville's grandmother was killed, her parents were given jewelry too."

"Have you met them, by the way?" asked Harry.

Ron's face reflected that it hadn't been a great experience. "Yes, and they're pretty much like she described them. Not rude, but definitely not friendly. Turns out they don't like her living here, but she's seventeen and she can live where she wants. They're lukewarm on me, though at one point when I was coming back into the room, when they thought I couldn't hear them, her mother said, 'well, at least he's a pure-blood.'"

Harry shook his head in sympathy. "I bet Pansy was pretty embarrassed."

"Yeah, she was, she kept apologizing after we got back. Probably kind of like what would happen if Ginny met your aunt and uncle, only not nearly so bad."

"Best if that never happens," agreed Harry. "So, Hugo, you're not doing an article about what happened to Archibald?"

Hugo's eyebrows went up. "You didn't see the paper this morning? I already did one."

"Hermione mentioned it later in the morning," said Ron. "She didn't say anything about it at the table because she figured you didn't need to be reminded of it."

"Very thoughtful," commented Hugo. "I talked to Kingsley, of course, and he said that you were pretty bad off, which I could have figured out anyway. I saw what happened, and I didn't really need quotes from you." Smiling, he added, "I would really love a few quotes from Dumbledore, though."

Harry and Ron laughed. "Yes, Ron saved me, then he saved all of us. I'm sure he would give you quotes, too, if it wasn't a security issue. Of course, it would all be about mysticism, the afterlife, that kind of stuff."

"Can you tell me, Harry, what does he say it is?" asked Hugo. "That's not the kind of perspective I can get from most people, even with my abilities."

Harry spent five minutes giving Hugo and Ron an overview of Dumbledore's accounts of the afterlife. "Of course, he doesn't know everything, because he hasn't moved on to the spiritual realm, as he calls it," concluded Harry. "He says there's all kinds of... 'systems of reality', he called them, that he doesn't know anything about, just that they exist, and are different places for spirits to go to have experiences. He says the whole... of everything, I don't know what to call it, is so vast we can't imagine it, but that our universe is like a drop of water in a huge ocean compared to what else exists."

Hugo and Ron exchanged impressed looks. "I must say, Harry, I do envy you that," said Hugo.

"I feel bad sometimes, because he tells me stuff, and a lot of it I don't really understand so well," admitted Harry. "He knows I don't understand, and he's really patient. He just finds a different way to tell me, or he tells me that I'll understand it with time. Some of it is just really difficult to wrap your mind around."

"I'll bet," said Hugo as he stood. "I should get going, I mainly wanted to reassure you that I'd be all right, because I had a feeling you'd be worried."

"Say, why don't you come to Diagon Alley with us?" asked Harry impulsively.

Hugo chuckled. "Thank you, Harry, it's nice of you to ask. But it's probably not a good idea for me to be seen socializing with you. People might think my articles about you had a 'point of view.'"

Harry rolled his eyes at being reminded of Skeeter. "I remember her saying that your articles about me had a 'point of view,' and it seemed like she was saying it just because you didn't write anything nasty about me."

Hugo nodded. "I disagree with her, of course; that was just a bit of projecting and self-justification on her part. I mean, you're not perfect, obviously, but you were chosen by a phoenix, which says a lot about the kind of person you are. She had to put a negative spin on you so she could justify to herself what she was doing. It wasn't as though I had to try very hard to not write much that was negative about you. I mean, I like you, and I can't pretend to be objective about that. But I do try very hard to keep my articles objective."

"By the way, there was another reason I came over here. Ron, the Prophet wants an article on you. A profile, more or less."

Ron's eyebrows shot up. "Me? Why?"

"Well, you did save Harry's life—"

"Twice," interjected Harry humorously, enjoying Ron's reaction.

"Yes, thank you," continued Hugo. "And everyone else in your group has had at least one article pretty much about them. Neville, after his grandmother was killed, Ginny and Pansy, after what happened when Malfoy left Hogwarts, and of course Hermione at the Veil of Mystery. So, it's your turn. Would this afternoon be okay, maybe after you get back from Diagon Alley?"

Harry adopted a deadpan tone. "I don't know, Hugo. Would it be page one?"

Hugo laughed as Ron gave Harry a friendly shove. "Depends on what news there is tomorrow, but probably, yes."

"Anyway, yeah, later is fine," said Ron. With a thoughtful expression, he added, "Funny, two or three years ago, I'd have been excited about this. Now... I don't mind, but..."

"Things are a bit more grim these days," suggested Harry. Ron nodded.

"Okay, I'll be over later," said Hugo. "Have a good time at Diagon Alley." They exchanged goodbyes, and Hugo left.

"So, you want to be my publicist now, do you?" Ron teased Harry.

Harry chuckled. "Well, you guys make fun of me often enough for not wanting to be in the papers. And like you said to Hermione once—"

"Save Harry's life enough, you're bound to get famous, I remember. I took the risk, I knew it could happen. Well, Mum'll be pleased, anyway."

"The twins'll have a massive go at you, though," Harry pointed out.

Ron rolled his eyes, then suddenly chuckled. "Not if I mention their shop, they won't. So, ready to go?" Harry nodded, and they stood. "Oh, by the way," Ron added, "we're not going straight to Diagon Alley. Apparently Kingsley wants to see all six of us, so we're going there first, then from there to Diagon Alley. Maybe there's new arrangements for being on call or something."

In a meeting room at the Auror training center, Kingsley gestured for the six to sit, then did so himself. "The new term starts in two weeks, so I wanted to discuss what we're going to do once that happens. Harry, of course, can Disapparate out of Hogwarts, so he can be on call like before. The rest of you... first, let me make sure, are you all okay to be on call, to the extent possible?" They nodded. "Thank you... I thought so, but I just wanted to be sure. Which of you go depends on where you are. If you're sleeping, Fawkes should get Ron and Neville, since they're in the same dormitory and can go together, whereas the girls are all split up. If whatever situation it is still isn't settled by then, he can get the girls one by one. If you're in classes or in the common room, most of you will be together; for example, if you're in classes, Ginny won't be there, and if you're in the common room, Pansy won't be there; with Harry's approval, Fawkes will go to wherever there are the most of you."

"That's fine, of course," confirmed Harry.

"Good. Bear in mind, we think calls will be very unlikely, especially now that Voldemort's going to be pretty spooked by Harry. But obviously, we still need to know what to do if something does happen. Harry, Ron, Ginny, if you're doing Quidditch practice when a call comes, Harry should stay on his broom, stop, and Apparate to the detection room while still on it, since as you know, you can't be moving when you Apparate. Ron and Ginny would take Fawkes, of course, and from there to the spot of the call. Being on brooms is an advantage in some kinds of combat situations because it gives you more maneuverability. Any questions?"

No one had any. "Okay, one more thing, then I'll let you go. I've already told all of you how much we appreciate what you've done, both in being on call and during the Apparation crisis. It's been extremely helpful, in both practical and morale-related ways, to know that we have you around if we need you. And we know that risking your lives isn't new to any of you, but you have done that in helping us as well. So, in addition to our thanks, we wanted you to have a more... substantial token of our appreciation.

"The crisis lasted a week, and some of you weren't there for all of it, but it could have lasted longer, and we know you all would have stayed on as long as it took." As he spoke, a chest in the corner opened, and well-crafted wooden boxes hovered out, one coming to rest in front of each of the six. "In recognition of that fact, we persuaded the Ministry to disburse to each of you one month of an Auror's salary, which is four hundred Galleons." Harry looked around to see his friends gaping, especially Ron, as they opened their boxes. He opened his, and saw the Galleons neatly arranged: twenty stacks of twenty, five across and four down, fitting exactly into the space of the box.

Obviously having noted their expressions, Kingsley added, "Let me be clear, this is not a gift. You earned this, all of you. We were going to give it to you at the end of the month, but that's when you're going back to Hogwarts. We thought you should have the chance to spend a bit of it, and since you're going to Diagon Alley today... well, have a good time, all of you." He left the room.

Harry's friends exchanged amazed looks; Harry was sure he was the only one to have ever had that much gold at once before. It wasn't so amazing for him, but he was very happy for them. I definitely have a feeling we're going to have a good time in Diagon Alley, he thought.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 9, The Last Car of the Hogwarts Express: As the school year begins, Harry meets the new Minister, and finds to his great surprise that they have something in common.

From Chapter 9: "I said, 'You know, nobody knows you're here but Aurors. I could kill you if I wanted. I could do to you what you did to my parents.' She just looked at me with this expression of, go ahead, do it."

9. Chapter 9

Chapter 9

The Last Car of the Hogwarts Express

The last two weeks of the summer passed without incident, and much too fast for Harry, who felt as though he hadn't had enough of a chance to enjoy the summer. He resumed sessions with Snape two days after finding out about the Memory Charm, and resumed training with the Aurors at the same time, having six days of training before the summer's end.

Hermione arranged for the purchase of a computer and the necessary equipment to use the internet, but soon after they received their payment from the Aurors, the six decided to contribute fifty Galleons each to pay for it. Arthur was extremely pleased, while Molly noted wryly that she would now always know where to find her husband. Phone service to connect the computer to the internet would not be installed until the students' first day back at Hogwarts, but Arthur wasted no time in learning about the computer's functionality. "Amazing, the things Muggles come up with," Harry heard Arthur say twice. Harry decided to send Dudley a letter (not an owl) thanking him for the idea. Dudley wrote back with his e-mail address, prompting Harry to have to ask Hermione what e-mail was.

Harry had to write another letter, to Woodridge, politely declining his offer to try out for the Quidditch World Cup team. He could have called Woodridge in the fireplace, but preferred not to have to listen to Woodridge try to persuade him to change his mind, given the temptation the offer represented. He did have to field a fireplace call from a

stunned Wood a few days later, and found it unpleasant to try to explain his reasons for declining while avoiding mentioning the most important one.

A week before the term started, Dentus visited Harry at the Burrow; Harry had offered to meet Dentus at his home, but Dentus refused to have Harry over even for a prearranged visit, fearing for Harry's safety. Dentus told Harry that he had decided to accept the position of History of Magic professor. Harry was pleased but also saddened, understanding that Dentus would have declined the position had his wife not died. Dentus pointed out to Harry that the position would keep him occupied as he coped with his loss, and would make sure he was around people, both of which he felt would be positive things at that time. Dentus reminded Harry of his promise to take his class, and Harry said that there would probably be a scheduling conflict with the classes Harry was teaching; Dentus said he would talk to McGonagall to see if his class could be arranged so that Harry could take it. Harry smiled, imagining Snape's reaction when told to make a last-minute schedule change.

On Saturday, the first of September, Harry had to go to Hogwarts for the first of his responsibilities of the year: the teachers' pre-term meeting. He recalled how intimidated he had felt at that meeting last year, and how he had bickered with Snape over the question of assigning detentions. He was pleased to recall that he had not had to give detention to anyone other than Malfoy. The meeting was scheduled for three o'clock, but he went to his quarters at two, then wandered around the castle, taking it all in. He decided to pay Hagrid a visit, and headed out to his hut.

"Jus' a minute," came the familiar shout when Harry knocked on the door, followed by the equally familiar barking. Hagrid opened the door and broke into a broad grin. "Harry! Come

in, come in. Good ter see yeh. Have a seat." Harry started to do so, but Hagrid suddenly said, "Actually, if yeh could help me o' bit firs'..." Harry stepped over closer to where Hagrid prepared his food, wondering what the problem was.

"Could yeh... get the fire goin' for me?" asked Hagrid, embarrassed.

Surprised, Harry said, "Sure," and pointed his wand at the burner. Flames suddenly burst out from below the pot of water.

"Great, thanks... er, could yeh make it a bit lower? Tha's it, thanks."

"No problem. How do you usually get the fire going?" It had just occurred to Harry that Hagrid's hut wouldn't have gas or electricity, but he did cook.

"Uh, the same way yeh jus' did, usually," Hagrid said confidentially, as he got down cups and tea bags. "Bin havin' a problem lately, fer some reason. Can' seem ter do any magic, like I jus' don' know how anymore. Strange thing..."

"That is strange," agreed Harry. "Have you talked to McGonagall about it? Maybe she could figure out what it was."

Hagrid looked reluctant. "Well, yeh see, technically, not supposed ter be doin' magic at all, yeh know," he pointed out. "Rather not go talkin' abou' it."

"I'd forgotten about that," Harry admitted. "I've seen you do it often enough that it doesn't occur to me. Do you think she'd have a problem with it? I mean, Albus never did."

Hagrid looked at Harry in surprise, then nodded. "Hard ter get used ter yeh callin' him that... jus' sounds strange. Not sayin' yeh shouldn', o' course, I know he wanted yeh ter. Anyway... I don' know, jus' don' wan' ter bother her. It'll come back, I'm sure."

Harry nodded, but made a mental note to ask Hermione if it was common for wizards to suddenly lose their magical ability temporarily; he had never heard of it. "I hope so. So, how's Grawp doing?" Harry had visited Hagrid a few times during the summer, once with Ginny, but the subject of Grawp hadn't come up.

"Better an' better, thanks," answered Hagrid enthusiastically. "Temper's much better, hardly ever gets mad anymore. His English is really comin' along, too, he can communicate real well, long as the conversation doesn' get too hard. Would yeh like ter come fer a visit?"

Harry found the idea didn't intimidate him like it would have a year ago, even though he didn't completely believe Hagrid's assurances about Grawp's behavior. "I would, actually, but I can't right now. The pre-term meeting's pretty soon, I just came early to wander around a bit."

"Ah, yes," said Hagrid, nodding. "Yeh know, Harry, sometimes I'm jus' as happy tha' I can' go inter the castle, 'cept fer the Great Hall," he confided. "Meetin's, conferences... I'm happy jus' stayin' here, doin' what I wan' ter do."

"I can understand that," agreed Harry. "Probably most of the teachers wouldn't mind skipping stuff like that, they just don't have a good excuse like you do. But you will be there for the teachers' dinner tonight?"

"If it's in the Hall, sure," said Hagrid agreeably. "Don' mind talkin' to people, jus' the meetin's aren' so good. Good thing they don' have the meetin's in the Hall, so I'd have ter come."

Harry chuckled. "I'll be sure not to mention it to McGonagall, but I'd bet she knows how you feel anyway." Harry talked to Hagrid for another half hour, then left so he could be a little early for the meeting. He headed back to his quarters, and to his surprise, ran into Dentus, who was leaving his own quarters.

"Archibald! Good to see you. So, what do you think, so far?"

Dentus shook his head, looking around. "It's been forty-eight years, as I was telling Professor McGonagall last night, but Hogwarts has barely changed. Which is nice, I think; some things should stay the same." Gesturing to the quarters he had just left, he added, "She told me that these would have been your quarters last year, but you didn't need them, and you ended up with Albus's. Which has a nice symmetry, considering their plans for you."

"I don't know what I'm going to do yet," Harry pointed out.

Dentus nodded. "I know, that's why I said 'their plans,' not 'your plans.' Anyway, that's another good thing about this job, these quarters. There were so many things to remind me of Sarah at home, which there won't be here. Not that I won't think of her, of course, but I've recently become rather conscious of the difference between thinking and obsessing." Harry nodded, saying nothing, but soon found that Dentus knew what he was thinking. "Harry, do you remember at that dinner, I made that joke about how bad you are at lying? Most of the reason for that is that your feelings show very vividly on your face, even if you don't

mean for them to. I may mention Sarah from time to time, and I don't want you thinking that it was your fault every time I do."

"Sorry," said Harry, embarrassed. "It's just..."

"I do understand, I'm not trying to give you a hard time," Dentus assured him. "I know you're very young to be doing what you're doing. One of the things that came up in my conversation during dinner last night with Professor McGonagall was last year's attack on Hogsmeade. I know you suffered a lot from that, and probably what happened to Sarah is a little like that. Voldemort goes after you, and people... get in the way."

"I know," agreed Harry heavily, "and I also know that people would die anyway, even if I wasn't doing this. They'd just be different people, people I didn't know. It's just hard for that to make me feel less bad when something like that happens." He paused. "I've been looking forward to the school year, in a way, even though I was able to relax a lot during the summer... I guess I always look forward to the school year, because until this summer, I always lived with my aunt and uncle in the summer, and I couldn't wait to get away. But coming back here this year, I can't help but think there's going to be another Hogsmeade, something like that. If there is, I just hope I'm in the middle of it."

"I can understand that," said Dentus sympathetically. "I know you won't want to hear this, but a lot of us will want to be there with you. I didn't use a wand much in politics, but I'm no slouch."

"Thanks, Archibald. I'm sure you're not. So, how was your dinner with Professor McGonagall?"

"Very good," said Dentus. "We're more or less contemporaries, so we had a lot to talk about. I'm six years older than her; it turns out that I was a seventh year when she was a first year. You remember I said I was Head Boy; she told me she remembers me scolding her for running in the halls."

"It's hard to imagine her running in the halls," grinned Harry. "Of course, it's hard to imagine her as being eleven. I should see if I can get her to show me some pictures sometime."

"Somehow I doubt she would, but I suppose you never know. That dinner made me think, the one last year was with you and Albus. That must have been very nice for you."

"I was kind of intimidated at first," recalled Harry, "but not for long. He was always good at making people feel comfortable. It was really nice. He told me stories about Hogwarts... getting to know him the way I did was the best thing about being a teacher."

"Better than helping all these young wizards and witches learn how to defend themselves?" asked Dentus humorously.

"That's a close second. I will say, it is nice... last year, at the end, I got to see how far the students had come, how much they improved over the year. It was a good feeling."

"I can imagine," agreed Dentus. "I'm looking forward to that, too. At the end of the year, I'll get to see how much they've..." Dentus trailed off, looking uncertain. "No, wait, it doesn't work for me." He then smiled to make sure Harry knew he was joking.

Harry laughed. "You'll get to see them apply their knowledge of history. I have a feeling they'll come out knowing a lot

more than when they came in. I definitely have a feeling I will."

"Thank you, Harry. By the way, just to let you know, I'm not expecting you to do the homework in my class." Noting Harry's raised eyebrows, he continued, "You're only taking it because I asked you to; it's not as though you need the N.E.W.T., and I really just wanted you to hear my lectures. I know you'll have very little time as it is."

Trying not to smile, Harry said, "I'll get Hermione to read me the important parts of the textbook."

Dentus laughed. "Like she does from the Prophet. You're certainly lucky to have her as a friend."

"In more ways than one," Harry agreed. "So, Professor Snape was able to change the schedule enough so I could take your class?"

Dentus seemed to be trying not to smile. "Yes, though he did make a very dry remark about it being no problem, that he needed something to keep him occupied."

Harry couldn't help but laugh, but stopped after a few seconds. "Yeah, I knew he wouldn't be happy about it. Well, I feel like I'm allowed to laugh, since he's said more than once that he'll be happy when I have to do it eventually."

"Professor McGonagall did say last night that not having to do that anymore was one of the good things about not being deputy headmistress," observed Dentus. "The bad thing, of course, is that she has to deal with politicians more than she used to."

"I assume you had a bit of a laugh at that," said Harry.

"Yes, we did," agreed Dentus, as he gestured to Harry that they should head to the meeting, and they started walking. "We talked about politics for a while, and I told her some stories. They're the type that would bore you, but she was pretty interested."

"Maybe I'll be interested in fifteen or twenty years," suggested Harry.

"Even if I'm still around, it's questionable whether I'll still be able to tell them to you then," said Dentus humorously. "I'll be saying, 'now, there was this man... oh, what was his name?'"

"Somehow I think you'll be all right."

"I hope so." They walked in silence for a moment, then Dentus said, "It's strange to think about that long from now... you'll have a nice, quiet life, and you'll probably remember this as the most exciting time of your life, but the most difficult as well. Not that I think you'll have nostalgia for it, but there's an energy to it, caused by the dire circumstances, that probably won't come again."

"I really hope it won't," said Harry fervently. "I don't know, Archibald. All I can tell you now is that I just want this to be over. Maybe some things are exciting; I guess I couldn't deny that the Apparation crisis was kind of exciting, trying so hard to get out there really fast, and helping in captures. But that happened because two Aurors were killed, and it was just a fight we had to win. I've cried so many times for people who got killed... I feel like that's what I'll always remember, not how exciting it was. Right now, I really want to have a nice, boring life."

Dentus put a hand on Harry's shoulder for a few seconds as they walked. "I can very much understand that. Perhaps

'exciting' was the wrong word; maybe 'intense' would have been better. 'Exciting' has a positive connotation which is definitely not appropriate to this situation."

They entered the staff room and sat next to each other, Harry exchanging greetings with some of the other teachers; everyone was there except Trelawney. Harry noticed that the large table at which they were sitting wasn't usually in the staff room, and he wondered if it was conjured. He looked at the clock on the wall, which read two minutes to three. Sprout, sitting on his other side, leaned over and whispered, "Sybil likes to come exactly on time. She really does prefer it up in her tower." Harry smiled a little and nodded. Harry noticed that Dentus was talking to John, who was sitting on his other side, and who thanks to Harry he already knew. McGonagall was sitting at one end of the table, Snape at the other.

At exactly three o'clock, Trelawney walked in and took the last seat, one of the two nearest Snape. "Excellent, we are all here," said McGonagall, who Harry felt was trying to conceal annoyance at Trelawney. "Welcome to another year, everyone. It is good to see you all again. Before we begin, I would like to introduce the newest member of our staff. Former Ministry of Magic Undersecretary Archibald Dentus has kindly accepted the post of professor of History of Magic."

Dentus exchanged nods with most teachers. "Has Professor Binns resigned?" asked Trelawney, clearly surprised. "I spoke with him from time to time; I would think he would not have left without informing me of his plans."

McGonagall seemed to be trying to choose her words carefully. "He did not resign, as such, but it was clear that he

intended not to return. He decided it was time to move on, and we must respect his decision. Now—"

"Excuse me, Professor," interrupted Trelawney, as Harry was sure he saw irritation flicker across McGonagall's face. "How was it 'clear?' I saw no portents, and I was his closest friend on the staff."

McGonagall glanced at Harry, and was about to answer, when Harry put up a hand to stop her. "It's okay, Professor," he said to McGonagall. "I'm not going to tell most of the students, but I did plan to tell the staff at some point." Looking at Trelawney, then others, he explained what had happened with Dumbledore. Like others he had told, they reacted mainly with awe, except Trelawney, who either didn't believe him or was trying to appear unimpressed. "So," he concluded, "he told me that Professor Binns wouldn't be back, and I told Professor McGonagall."

"Heavens..." said Sprout, amazed. "And he stays where he is to talk to you?"

Harry glanced at McGonagall, who answered the question. "As was his intention all along, he stays where he is to assist in the struggle against Voldemort. More than that I cannot say, for security reasons."

There were more impressed looks. Flitwick shook his head and said, "I must say, if he can die and still help against Voldemort, then Voldemort's in trouble."

"That is the idea," agreed McGonagall. "Returning to the topic, I wish to thank Professor Dentus for taking the position. In other personnel-related announcements before we get underway, the Head Boy and Girl this year will be Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff and Hermione Granger of Gryffindor."

Harry had to fight off an urge to interject, 'And if we were Aurors, money would be changing hands right now.'

McGonagall continued, "And as I am now the headmistress, I cannot continue in my role as Head of Gryffindor House; the new Head of Gryffindor House is Professor Potter."

Harry got some impressed looks. "So, as a student and a Head of House," said Sprout with amusement, "you could end up having to discipline yourself."

Several teachers laughed, including Harry. "I hope it doesn't come to that," he replied. "I think I'll try to talk to myself first, see if I can get myself to listen to reason. Knowing me, though, I doubt it'll work."

"You could have Hermione talk to you, on your behalf," suggested John. "You would probably listen to her."

"Fascinating though the ramifications are," said McGonagall dryly, "we should get on with the meeting. Before we discuss our plans for the year, is there any business anyone wishes to discuss?"

"Yes, Headmistress, I have something," said Snape, to Harry's surprise. "It concerns the Slytherin Quidditch team. As you know, six of the seven members of last year's team graduated last year, and the remaining player is inexperienced. I myself am not well versed in the nuances of Quidditch, leaving open the question of how new players for this year's team are to be selected."

"Couldn't Madam Hooch do it?" asked Sprout.

"I discussed it with her; she informed me that she does not feel competent to evaluate talent," said Snape. Looking at McGonagall, he asked, "I assume I may choose the person I wish to choose the team members?"

"If the person agrees, certainly," said McGonagall.

"Thank you," said Snape politely. "I would therefore request that Professor Potter choose the six new team members."

Harry gaped in surprise, as heads turned and eyebrows rose. He looked at Snape as if not sure he'd heard correctly.

"You're jo- okay, you're not joking," he quickly amended, as he remembered who he was talking to. "But not only am I the head of Gryffindor House, I play on the Gryffindor team! I don't think there could be a much bigger conflict of interest than that."

"I am perfectly willing to stipulate the conflict of interest," replied Snape calmly. "I remain confident that you will choose the best players possible; I am given to understand that those chosen by a phoenix possess a certain integrity of character. Or is that merely a misconception?"

Harry gave Snape an annoyed look. "You're just getting back at me for those comments about the schedule, aren't you."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Hardly. I chose you because you are the person on staff with the most Quidditch experience. However, your reluctance is understandable. No doubt you are concerned that you will do such a good job of selecting players that your hold on the Quidditch Cup may be threatened. I am sure no one would think less of you were you to turn down my request for that reason."

Annoyed as he was, Harry couldn't help but smile a little. Also smiling, Flitwick said, "Gee, Harry, do you think he's trying to manipulate you?"

"No, he's just getting in a few shots at me," replied Harry. "He knows I'll do it anyway. Okay, Professor, I'll choose the best team I can, and we'll still win the Cup."

"It would hardly be a surprise, as your team is experienced, whereas mine will not be," admitted Snape. "In three or four years, though, things may be different."

Harry nodded. "Yes, they might," he agreed. "And don't worry, I'll choose younger rather than older, other things being equal."

"Just out of curiosity, why?" asked John.

"You always want to choose younger if you can, so the players can get more experienced and be better when they're older," explained Harry. "If I choose mostly second and third years, they'll be pretty good when they're sixth and seventh years."

"Sounds like you're going out of your way to be fair," commented Flitwick.

Harry shrugged. "If I do it, I have to do it like I would if it were my team."

"Well, that is settled, then," said McGonagall, in an unmistakable 'let's move on' tone. "Are there any other questions before we proceed?"

"Yes, I have a question, Professor," said Harry, a thought suddenly having popped into his head. "Are there contingency plans in case the castle comes under attack?"

He got a few surprised looks. "What makes you think that'll happen?" asked John.

Harry was surprised that John should have to ask. "I'm here," he said simply.

"He tried hard to kill you last year, but he didn't attack the castle," John pointed out.

"And nothing has worked, so he might try," argued Harry. "Besides, he's had a whole year to prepare, he might have figured out a way." Harry found he didn't want to say what he thought was the most important reason Voldemort wouldn't have tried it the year before: that Dumbledore was there then, but now was not. He knew McGonagall probably understood that as well, but saying it somehow seemed insulting to McGonagall.

"The castle is a highly secure environment, protected by many kinds of ancient magic, as you know," said McGonagall to Harry reassuringly. "The founders made sure that this was so, and Hogwarts has never in its many-centuries history been successfully invaded. However, we do take the possibility seriously, and the Aurors have plans for its defense. I suggest you take up the matter with Mr. Shacklebolt if you would like further information."

"I will, thanks," he said. He specifically wondered what would happen with the students, how they would be protected. He also knew that many would want to join the fight, and he felt that at least sixth and seventh years should be allowed to. He decided on the spot to teach advanced dueling to the sixth years as well as the seventh years.

"If there is nothing else, then," prompted McGonagall. "Very well, as usual we shall go around the table and get each professor's thoughts as to how they will approach their classes, from most junior to most senior. Professor Dentus, if you would begin."

With a glance and a smile at Harry, Dentus said, "I never would have thought I'd be junior to a seventeen-year-old.

Well, as I told the headmistress and the deputy headmaster yesterday, I plan to generally follow the established curricula for each year's classes, but emphasize the current situation and link it to similar historical events. I am interested in having the students understand that we are in the midst of historically significant events, which will one day be written about in history books. I think it will help them to empathize with those who lived throughout other historically significant times."

"Interesting, it sounds like a very good idea," commented Sprout. "Will you be mentioning the fact that they'll also be taking classes from a historically significant figure?"

Dentus smiled at Harry again. "Well, this particular historically significant figure tends to get embarrassed rather easily, so I shouldn't answer here. But I imagine it'll come up once or twice."

"Come on," said Harry to Dentus, annoyed and embarrassed. "If I dropped dead tomorrow—which, you know, could happen—then I wouldn't be very historically significant, would I?"

Dentus gave a mild shrug. "Less so, I admit; I understand you haven't exactly defeated Voldemort yet. But I was speaking more of the energy of love. If you died tomorrow along with your friends, then yes, the energy of love might die in its crib, so to speak, and your historical significance would be diminished. But if its use becomes even somewhat widespread, it will have great historical significance, even more so than if you defeat Voldemort. I see that you hadn't thought of it quite that way."

"I'm just busy trying not to be killed, it's hard to think about things like historical significance," said Harry, trying not to

be obviously embarrassed.

"That's why it's good to take History of Magic, you can understand these things better," teased Dentus.

McGonagall cleared her throat. "Well, amusing as it is to make sport of Professor Potter, we should stop there." Harry had a feeling of gratitude until she added, "There will be plenty more chances throughout the year." He gave her a long-suffering look as the other teachers laughed. "I apologize, Harry, that was hard to resist. Now, as you are the next most junior professor, the floor is yours."

Harry paused for a few seconds. "I guess I'm going to do things similarly to last year—focusing on practical things—but even more so. Like I said, I'm expecting an attack on the school; at least, I can't ignore the strong possibility. I want every student to be able to defend him or herself as well as possible. I'm going to focus strongly on dueling, real dueling, for the sixth and seventh years, maybe even start the topic for the fifth years. I'll be teaching the Patronus Charm to anyone I think can learn it. Lots of emphasis on Stunning, Disarming, Protection, Impediment, that sort of thing."

The other teachers exchanged glances, but said nothing. Finally McGonagall said, "That sounds fine, Professor. But I am sure you know that most of us are wondering whether you will attempt to teach students how to use the energy of love."

"You, and everyone I came in contact with all summer," said Harry. "I can't answer it exactly, though, because it depends a lot on the reactions I get when it comes up in class. Obviously Hermione being able to use the new spells against Voldemort got people's attention, and I understand that. But

it's going to be very difficult for a lot of people, which I'm going to tell them. And just because I was able to teach my friends doesn't mean it'll be easy to teach anyone else. Part of me wants to take it slowly, take a few years to try it out on different groups before I try it in classes. But I also know that it could save lives if even some people get it fairly quickly, like my friends did. In the classes, I'm just going to watch what happens, and decide as I go. Professor Dumbledore was always telling me to use my intuition, and this seems like a good time to do that."

McGonagall nodded. "As your intuition has provided you with two highly useful spells, I would not want to argue with it. John, your turn."

As John explained that his course's main change would involve making students aware of the internet, Harry mentally drifted, wondering if he would actually be mentioned in history books. He had never contemplated such a thing before, even though at their first meeting Hermione had told him he was mentioned in books of recent history. He felt that it would be great in other circumstances, but as he had said to Dentus, all he could think about was how much he wanted a nice, boring life.

After the meeting, the group moved to the Great Hall for the teachers' feast and social event, from which Snape was again absent. After the meal, everyone stood and circulated; Harry felt far more comfortable than he had at the previous year's event, now that he knew everyone and was comfortable with them. Well, except Trelawney, he thought, as she took twenty minutes pressing him for details as to how he communicated with Dumbledore.

She finally let him go, after which he was approached by an obviously amused McGonagall. "I assume you heard that

conversation?" he asked.

"Enough of it," confirmed McGonagall. "It was clear even at the meeting, when you told the room about what had happened, that she was most put out. She clearly feels that you are treading on her territory."

"But this has nothing to do with Divination," pointed out Harry. "Albus doesn't know the future."

"It is close enough, apparently. It seems that anything... otherworldly is enough to draw her attention, and that she wishes Albus were talking to her rather than you."

Harry shook his head. "Was she really that close to Professor Binns? I wouldn't think so, if he didn't even say goodbye to her."

"I don't know, really. All I can say is that they both tended to avoid the staff room."

"Speaking of which, will we be seeing you in the staff room, now that you're the headmistress?"

"Yes, I think you will," she said. "I will still be teaching this year, and it will be more convenient than going to... I want to say, Albus's office. He was here for so long, it simply seems like his, rather than that of the headmaster or headmistress. Next year, I will not be teaching, so I will probably spend more time there."

"That reminds me, is there a portrait of him in there now, along with all the other ones of past headmasters?"

"Yes, there is," she said. "Of course, it has no relationship to what you see when you talk to him at night; the portrait may not even know that you are unless you tell it. Then again, he

did plan it, so it is possible. It will certainly not know what you talk about with Albus, though. You do understand that the portrait will not be quite the same as he was, though it will be similar."

"Yes, I know," he agreed. "Let me ask you, Professor... how does it feel, knowing that you'll be the next one whose portrait goes up there?"

"I could ask you the same question," she pointed out. "You could be after me. How would it make you feel?"

He hadn't thought about that. "I suppose since I'd be dead, it wouldn't matter much one way or the other."

She nodded. "And that is exactly how I feel."

"I understand," he said. "Professor, do you think Albus will be written about in history books?"

"He already has been," she pointed out. "But I assume you mean, in the ones written a hundred years from now. I'm not sure, Harry. But let me ask you: if he is, what do you think will be said about him?"

Harry thought for a moment. "It's hard to say... history's never been my subject, I'm not sure what they say about people in history books, only what they did. I guess it would say the same things that are on his Chocolate Frog card."

"And how would you remember him to someone else, if you had to do it in only a few sentences?"

He thought again. "That he was a man of principle, that he did what he thought was right... and that it would be hard to imagine someone more kind, caring, and loving than he was."

She smiled, emotion in her eyes. "Yes, exactly. That is why I feel that what is written about us in history books is not so important. What is important is how we are remembered by those we leave behind, and I know for a fact that even those who knew him far less well than you and I remember him the same way. That is surely as much as any of us can hope for."

She drifted off to talk to someone else, leaving Harry alone with his thoughts. He was approached by Dentus. "I heard most of that, Harry, I was waiting to talk to you when you and she were finished. She's certainly right, and I don't think Albus could be summed up better than you did. But unfortunately, I come to bring you back down to reality, the here and now, the world of moral compromises."

Harry gave Dentus a quizzical look. With a wry smile, Dentus continued, "Of course, that seems to be my role in your life. Anyway... I didn't talk to you yesterday, but I'm sure you, or Hermione, saw in the Prophet that Rudolphus Bright was made Minister of Magic." Harry nodded. "I spent some time before today's meeting talking to old friends in the Ministry, and one of them said that he wanted to talk to me. Of course, everyone knows now about my relationship with you. I talked with Bright in a fireplace, and he wants to have a meeting with you. I explained our schedule today, and how busy you usually are, especially once the school year starts. He asked me to ask you if you would be willing to see him tonight, after the social event is finished."

"Well, you did say this would happen," said Harry resignedly. "I suppose so, better to do it now than once I get really busy. Does he want me to meet him at the Ministry?"

"No, Harry. He'll come here. You can decide where to meet him; your quarters might be a good place."

"He'll come here? Why? I can just take Fawkes to see him, but he has to come through Hogsmeade, guarded by Aurors. Is there something else he wants to do here?"

"No, Harry," Dentus explained patiently. "This is a gesture on his part, or you could say it's part of political theater. In politics, where you meet is important. In your office? His office? Someplace neutral? He knows he could ask you to come to the Ministry, and you would. By coming here to meet you, he's making a show of respect, for you and your accomplishments."

Harry was impressed. "I didn't know it worked like that. When should I meet him?"

"I talked to Professor McGonagall, and she said we would be finished here by about a quarter to eight, so eight seems like a good time. I can go off to a fireplace and let him know, and I'm sure he'll be here by then."

"Okay, that's fine," agreed Harry. "Do you have any advice for what I should say to him? Do you know why he wants to talk to me?"

"To answer the second one first, you're one of the most important wizards in the country, right up there with him and Kingsley; he wants to have a relationship with you. If I had to guess, I'd say he'll talk to you with an unusual-for a politician-degree of respect and honesty, because he knows what kind of person you are, and what will have a good impression on you. I don't know exactly what he'll say, but I do understand that his goal will be simply for you to think well of him. He almost certainly will not ask you to protect him; he knows that since you're very brave, he won't impress you by not acting bravely. As for advice, I wouldn't suggest anything in particular to say to him. I wouldn't

bother asking him his opinions on issues, since he would just tell you what you wanted to hear, and you're not that well versed in them anyway. I would say, just get a sense of how he presents himself, of who you'll be dealing with in the future, because you almost certainly will. You'll be fine. Just think of how Albus would have dealt with him. Be honest, be yourself, don't concern yourself with questions of how much power or influence you have, and you'll be all right. Okay, I'll go let him know. You should just go to your quarters a little before eight." As Dentus walked away, Harry thought about how ironic it was that most people would think it was a great honor to be paid a visit by the Minister of Magic, but he would just as soon return to the Burrow. He held up his hand to tell Ginny why he would be back later than he had thought.

Harry walked into his quarters at five minutes to eight, wishing that Ginny could be there with him. Not that she would want to talk to Bright either, but he always felt better with her around. Partly out of a lack of anything else to do, he sat and focused on love, much as he would before a session with Snape.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door; Harry stood and opened it with his wand. Rudolphus Bright walked in; Harry got a quick glimpse of Dawlish outside the door, providing security. Harry knew that Bright's age was forty-five, but he looked at least five years younger. He had brown hair with no gray in it, and was about the same height as Harry. "Professor Potter, Rudolphus Bright. I'm very pleased to meet you."

As he shook Bright's hand, what Harry particularly noticed was Bright's eyes; they were quick, intelligent, seeming to show more of Bright's character than a politician would want them to. Harry reminded himself that Dentus had said that

Bright was very skilled with people, so he should assume that Bright could present himself any way he wanted to. "Thank you, Minister, it's nice to meet you. Please, sit down." They sat in the two chairs in which he and Dumbledore had sat a year and a day ago.

"Thank you for seeing me, Professor," said Bright. "I know you're very busy, maybe busier than I am."

"Well, I will be starting tomorrow, but today isn't so bad," said Harry. "But I admit that I was surprised when I heard you wanted to see me. You were made minister just the other day; you must have a lot of things to do."

"Yes, I do," said Bright agreeably, "and one of those things is to see, and hopefully get to know a little, some of the people I'll be working with, that I'll be in contact with. You are high up on that list; you must know that."

"Only because Archibald told me," said Harry humorously. "I would have had no idea otherwise."

"I guess that's understandable," said Bright. "You're only seventeen, you haven't had much time to get used to the idea that you're an important person. But you are, of course. For me, this is like starting a new job and talking to the people I'll be dealing with. You and I may not have anything to do with each other right away, but it seems inevitable that we will at some point, with me leading the Ministry, and you leading the fight against Voldemort. Also, we may know each other for quite a while. I could be Minister for a long time—at least, I hope so—and you'll always have influence, be important. It just makes sense that we should get to know one another."

"I understand," said Harry, "but it doesn't seem right to say that I'm leading the fight against Voldemort. I mean, there's

Kingsley, and Professor McGonagall, they're the ones who make the important decisions."

Bright smiled at Harry's modesty. "They may be in charge, but you're leading the fight. Leading is done by example more than with words; you don't say a lot, but you do a lot. At the end of June, a whole class of students saw you go off to face Voldemort, your only concern being for Professor Dumbledore's safety, and for Mr. Longbottom's. Things like that are what inspire people to want to follow you. Whether you like it or not, you have influence, and you deserve that influence."

"Why do you say, 'whether you like it or not?'" wondered Harry. He was fairly sure he'd never said any such thing publicly.

"Well, now, I can tell just by talking to you," said Bright. "But of course I've read all the interviews you've done with the Prophet, and reading between the lines of what you say, it's not hard to tell. You'd just as soon do what you do and be left alone."

Harry nodded. "I... as Hermione would put it, I have 'issues' with fame."

"My only issue with fame is that I'd like more of it," said Bright with a self-deprecating chuckle. "Well, not fame as such, but just as it relates to political power. There is a definite correlation between being well-known and having power."

"I've never understood the appeal of having power," said Harry. As he spoke, he became aware of an odd feeling in his head, something fleeting, yet familiar, which he couldn't quite place.

"Spoken like a true Gryffindor," said Bright with a smile.

"I guess you were a Slytherin?" asked Harry.

"No, a Ravenclaw, actually," replied Bright. "Considering how ambitious I've always been, I could easily have been a Slytherin. But many people have characteristics that could place them in more than one House, and the Sorting Hat just has to pick which one it thinks is best. For example, from what I've read, Hermione could easily have been a Ravenclaw. The Hat must have just decided that her courage was more important than her intelligence, and clearly it was right."

"Can I ask you... to you, what's the appeal of having power?" asked Harry. As he asked, he decided to check Bright with Legilimens when he answered. He had practiced checking for lies enough at the Burrow over the past two weeks, and with the Aurors, that he felt comfortable that his checking would not be detected.

"Now, there's an interesting question," mused Bright, "and one I'm not asked all that often, because the answer seems to most people to be self-evident. But..." Bright trailed off, a slightly puzzled look crossing his face. His eyes widened, and he looked at Harry with undisguised surprise. "You're a Legilimens?"

Now Harry was surprised, and somewhat embarrassed, but nodded. "Professor Dumbledore taught me, or started to, before he died. He thought I needed it to be able to deal with Voldemort, who is one as well. But I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

Bright waved off his apology. "Please, Professor, you don't have to apologize. If there's any time you need Legilimency,

it's when you're talking to a politician, especially one you don't know. I completely understand."

"I don't mean anything about you personally," Harry said anyway. "But I'm surprised you could tell; I thought I was good enough by now that people couldn't tell, unless..." Now Harry was surprised, as he recalled something that Dumbledore had told him about Legilimency: that checking for lies could usually be detected only if the other person was a Legilimens as well.

"Unless I was one too," said Bright, finishing Harry's sentence. "Which I am. Had you noticed that I was checking you before?"

"I noticed something," said Harry, "but I wasn't sure what it was. I'm still sort of new at this, so I don't recognize everything."

Bright nodded sympathetically. "It's a very delicate skill, which I'm sure you've noticed by now. You know, you're the first person who's caught me out with this. There are very few Legilimens, and I try not to check people until I'm fairly sure they're not one. It never occurred to me that you might be, since you're so young. But I shouldn't be surprised, since you have enough power to do it, plenty of incentive, and an excellent teacher. I didn't even know that Dumbledore was, though I had heard rumors."

"If only people who are Legilimens can recognize it, then why do you try so hard not to be noticed?" asked Harry.

Bright smiled. "I can see why you wouldn't have thought of this, but if it became publicly known, it would be the end of my career." Harry's face reflected his surprise. "People would assume that I advanced by devious means," explained Bright. "People are nervous around Legilimens, which is why

we don't make it known that we are. I would never have made it to this position if people had known."

"I guess I can understand that," said Harry. "Hugo has said that people sometimes react badly to him. But to tell you the truth—" Harry laughed, saying, "That's kind of a funny phrase to use when talking to a Legilimens; you might think, 'I'll be the judge of that,' but anyway, I've been considering going public with it."

Bright's eyebrows rose high. "Why would you do that?"

"It has to do with teaching people to use the energy of love," explained Harry. "Ron was having a very hard time, and he asked me to go looking for stuff that might be stopping him. I did, and it worked. I might want people I'm teaching to know that I can do that if they want me to; it could be the difference between them being able to do it or not, and it's the kind of thing that could save their lives."

Bright looked impressed and doubtful. "I can see what you're saying, Professor, but—"

"Please, call me Harry."

"Thank you, and you should call me Rudolphus. As I was saying, I find it hard to imagine that many people would request it. You know very well what an invasion of privacy it is. People would have to want it very badly to allow that."

"Rudolphus, practically everyone I've met this summer has asked me if I'm going to teach it. I think people want it pretty badly, and this would only be for people who asked for it, obviously."

"I understand, but my point is that you would be making quite a sacrifice. People would react to you differently if they

knew; at least, a lot would. I assume you've gotten to know Brantell fairly well; you should talk to him about it. I'm not saying you shouldn't do it, just that you should think about it carefully. Maybe teach it for a while, see how it goes; maybe most people won't need it. Letting it be known would be a big thing." Bright paused, then regarded Harry with a very serious expression. "I'd like to ask you, Harry... who, if anyone, do you plan to tell about this?"

Harry had to think. "My inclination would be to tell the other five, and Archibald; I can't really think of anyone else who I would bother to tell. I assume you'd really rather I didn't tell Archibald."

Bright chuckled. "What I'd really rather was that you told not a single other person. It's nothing personal about Dentus, who I respect and think is a good man. But I just don't want anyone knowing, especially someone in politics. It's easy to be tempted to use information in unethical ways."

Harry frowned. "Do you mean that you've never used information you've gotten from your ability to advance in politics?"

"No, of course I have," admitted Bright. "That's how I know how easy it is to be tempted. I do try not to behave unethically, and you should feel free to check any of my answers that you want to. I don't mind."

Harry sensed that Bright was telling the truth, but that he had used the word 'try' for a reason. "Do you think it's ethical to use this information at all, or only to use it when someone else is being especially dishonest? I mean, people can lie for privacy reasons, and they should be able to."

"I know, that's true," agreed Bright. "And I have wrestled with the ethical implications of it, more than once. To answer

your question, the more deceitful they are, the freer I feel to use the information I get. I'm not saying I have a right for nobody else to know, just a preference, one that I'm sure you can understand."

"I suppose I do," said Harry. "But with Archibald, the problem is... he may not be a Legilimens, but he can read my face very well. If I tell him about this meeting and don't tell him this, he'll know I'm not telling him something. I don't want him feeling that he can't trust me, and he can't give me as good advice if he doesn't know something like this. I do feel like I need his advice, it's very important to me. I'm pretty lost in politics."

Bright sighed in displeasure. "I see that, though I won't pretend I'm not unhappy about it. All right, but if you're willing, I'd very much like you to ask him, as a personal favor from you, not to tell anyone, and to check his answer with Legilimens. Will you do that?"

"Yes, I will," replied Harry. "And I won't tell my friends unless there's some very good reason. Except Hermione; she'd probably find out anyway, she's the one I practice with."

Again, Bright looked impressed. "I guess you really are close friends. You know that there are serious privacy issues with this. But, Harry, I know you're being truthful, but I'm getting the sense of a lie of omission. There's something else, a part of your answer to my question, that you're not telling me. I don't mention noticing things like that most of the time, but this is very important to me."

Now Harry sighed, knowing that Bright had noticed him omit any mention of the fact that Snape would find out. "There is one other person who's going to know, but everything connected with the situation is extremely confidential. I

promise you that the information will go no further than this other person. I'm sorry, but I just can't tell you any more than that."

"Harry, I am now the Minister of Magic," pointed out Bright. "I can be trusted with confidential information."

"It's confidential as much for personal reasons as anything else," said Harry, hoping Bright would stop asking him questions before he stumbled onto something. "Trust me, I just can't talk about it. If you knew the situation, you would understand and agree. This is something that's important to the fight against Voldemort."

Harry got the sense of Bright checking his truthfulness. "I'm not happy with this, either, but I know you're telling me the truth, so I'll live with it."

"Thank you," said Harry sincerely. "By the way, just how common are Legilimens? Do you know how many there are?"

Bright shook his head. "There's no way to know, since we don't announce ourselves. My grandfather, who taught me, said he heard it estimated that it's one in every five hundred to a thousand wizards. It sounds reasonable to me; I am very sure it's not common." He paused, then continued, "We got started on this because you asked me what I found appealing about power, and you considered my answer important enough to check, which you hadn't done until then. I will answer, but I'd like to ask you first: why is it such an important question to you, considering that most people would find the answer obvious?"

"I don't have positive associations with the idea of power," said Harry. "Albus kept his distance from it, didn't chase it. Voldemort thinks it's all there is to life. Lucius Malfoy was able to buy it with money. And Cornelius Fudge abused it

two years ago, used it as a weapon instead of a responsibility. So..."

Harry paused long enough that Bright finished his sentence. "If someone does chase it, you feel like you want to know why, what they plan on doing with it when they have it. It's a very good question, Harry, and it's been quite a while since I thought about it in those terms. The answer I would give if asked publicly, the standard politician's answer, is 'I want to do good, I want to help the people of the wizarding community, to create the best possible lives for them,' and so forth. Now, on some level, that's true. I do want to do good, and I think many people at the Ministry do, as well. I think most of us start out that way. But the real challenge is to reach a position where you can do good while not getting so corrupted by the process that you forget to do it when you get there. Power starts to become an end in itself; the reason to have it, just so one can keep it. That sounds like a circular answer, but it really is true. I'm sure Dentus would say something like this if you asked him. Power is so hard to get that it takes all of your effort just to get it, and keep it.

"I realize I haven't exactly answered your question yet, but it is a difficult one, if you try to go beyond the obvious answer of 'it's good to have power.' I suppose the answer that comes to mind right now is that it's a way of testing myself, that I want to see how well I can do with power, with this job. I really think I can do it better than it's been done recently, not just Fudge, but others before him as well. Maybe it's like you wanting to do well at Quidditch, or teach your classes well. I think I have talent at this—hopefully, not only at getting power, but at doing well with it once I have it. And I think I don't delude myself by saying that there's some level of unselfishness in it: after all, the person I'm replacing was killed for no other reason than that he had this job. The safe thing to do, and what some candidates did, was to pass on

trying for it this time, and try again in the future, after Voldemort's gone. But somebody had to do it, and I decided I would. I still don't know if I've answered your question, but I think I've done the best I can. I will say that it's very possible to have power and not mess it up, even though that's not been your experience. Maybe your History of Magic teacher can tell you about that."

Harry chuckled at the last comment. "I'll definitely ask him. And I appreciate your answering the question like you did. You could have just given me the standard politician's answer, and I would never have known the difference."

Bright's expression suggested that there was something obvious that Harry wasn't seeing. "Dentus would. If I had, and you told him, he would tell you that I wasn't worth listening to, treating you like you were some idiot. And he'd be right."

"But when it comes to politics, I'm not too far from that," Harry pointed out.

"Especially considering your age, you don't deserve to be treated that way, though. Maybe you don't know about politics and couldn't be Minister of Magic, but I don't know about the energy of love, and couldn't face Voldemort without fear. You deserve to be treated with respect, no matter what the context. And in terms of talking to you, it's simple common sense, from a political point of view. I'm sure Dentus told you something like that."

Harry nodded. "He said, 'the next Minister of Magic is going to want to be your friend.'"

Bright laughed loudly as Harry smiled. "He's absolutely right, of course. It must seem strange to you, but it's a given to any politician. As I said was the reason I wanted to see

you, you have influence, and as the Minister of Magic, of course I want to have working relationships with people of influence. That doesn't mean we'll agree all the time, but we probably will sometimes, and it's good for each of us to know where the other stands. You see, Harry, there are different centers of influence in any society, and I'll never be able to make all of them happy, but I'll want to make as many of them happy at the same time as I can. For example, the Aurors have a lot of influence, and I want them to be satisfied with what I'm doing, which I can do by supporting things like the ARA. Now, I also want to keep business leaders happy, but they don't like the ARA, because it costs them money. They grudgingly accept it, but you see what I mean. There are many such groups, in politics called 'constituencies.' Some are more powerful, some not so much, but I have to pay attention to all of them.

"Now as for you, you're a very unusual constituency, from a politician's point of view. My impression is that you're going to be the constituency that wants me to... simply do what's right, I suppose you could say. You're not going to care about trade policies or business regulations, but if I do something that you think is just plain wrong, I think that's when I'm going to hear from you. Does that sound about right?"

"I suppose so, but it would have to be pretty important to me before I'd think to call you and tell you that."

Bright nodded. "That's as it should be, of course. You want to save your influence for what's important. Now, that doesn't mean that if you do, I'll say, 'you're right, Harry, I'll do it your way.' I may recognize that what you suggest is the right thing to do, but it may be that I'll upset a lot of powerful constituencies by doing what's right. You'd be amazed at how often that can happen. I may say, 'you're right, Harry, but the problem is that I'll lose a lot of support by doing the

right thing, and I can't afford that.'" His expression became more serious, and Harry got the impression that to Bright, what he was about to say was the most important thing he would say in the meeting. "What you need to always keep in mind is that a politician's political standing is the most important consideration in almost any decision, and that's the way it has to be. I simply can't do my job if I don't have political support. Nine times out of ten, if I have a decision to make, I'll make the one that gets me the most support. That may seem crass and self-serving, but it's also the will of the people, as expressed through constituencies. People essentially put you into a position, then say, 'do what we want you to do.' For things I feel very strongly about, I can buck the will of the people and get away with it. But not very often."

Dentus had said things like this, thought Harry, though he hadn't made this point quite so specifically. "I'm wondering... what made you think that my main interest would be in your doing the right thing?"

"You were chosen by a phoenix, Harry," said Bright. "There tends to be a consistency in the kinds of people phoenixes choose. Historically speaking, it's extremely rare for a political leader to be chosen by a phoenix, and when it happened, it was always someone upon whom political power was thrust, rather than someone who sought it. Look at Dumbledore. People were pleading with him to be Minister sixteen years ago, but he wouldn't do it, and he was right not to do so. He didn't do it because he would have done what was right in every situation, not what was popular, and he would have slowly lost popularity and support until he eventually would have been replaced. Both Muggles and wizards have used the phrase 'we get the government we deserve,' and there's a lot of truth to it. We certainly didn't deserve Dumbledore. Anyway, I tell you this because there

may come a time when you get upset with me for doing something that's arguably wrong. I may agree with you in principle, but feel I have to make a decision based on politics." Humorously, he added, "If I made my decisions based on what would be approved of by people who were chosen by phoenixes, I really wouldn't last long."

Slightly embarrassed, Harry smiled, but then asked, "If that's true, then why am I a constituency? Why pay attention to anything I say?"

"See, you're definitely not an idiot, Harry. That you ask that question shows that you're absorbing what I'm saying. To answer, you have the support of people who admire your bravery; you're like a symbol for what's noble. Because of what you've done, some people will support you to an extent even if you say things they don't agree with. If I do something you disapprove of so strongly that you feel you need to speak publicly, I'll lose support. If I do the right but not-so-popular thing, like Fudge did with the ARA, I may ask you for support to help me do it. Either way, what you think and say will figure in my support in certain situations, so I have to consider it as a factor. That's why you're an important constituency."

Harry shook his head. "I guess I understand; Archibald has told me some parts of this already. It all just seems so... I don't know, like a big business deal or something. Things are decided on how much political support they have, not on..." he trailed off, realizing what he was about to say, and smiling a little as he did so.

"Not on whether or not they're right," finished an amused Bright. "See, that's it, you're that constituency. And I do see what you mean; part of me wishes it could be like that. I just know it can't. I feel like, sometimes I'll get to do what's right,

if I'm lucky. Maybe occasionally I'll call you and ask you what you think is the right thing to do, in some situation. You'll tell me, and I'll say, yes, I can't do that, but wouldn't it be great if I could."

They both chuckled, then Bright stood. "Well, I really should be on my way. I don't want to keep you too long, and I want to visit Professor McGonagall before I leave. But I appreciate your taking the time to see me."

"I'd imagine most people have time to see the Minister of Magic," said Harry as they walked to the door. "But I enjoyed talking to you. It was kind of like talking to Archibald; I learned a lot."

Bright smiled. "That's probably the most genuine compliment I've heard in a long time. Thank you." He shook Harry's hand and left. Harry silently summoned Fawkes, who took him back to the Burrow, for his last night there before the start of the term.

* * * * *

Harry awoke at his usual time, glad that he had kept his sleep schedule similar to what it was at Hogwarts. At breakfast, he and his friends talked excitedly about the term ahead, though Molly was subdued, making a few comments about how sad it would be to have an empty home again. Hermione pointed out that they might be back again next summer, though Harry realized it would be less likely that all of them would be back if Voldemort were defeated.

After breakfast, they all went upstairs to pack, except for Hermione, who had done it the day before, and went to Harry, Ron, and Neville's room to be with Neville while he packed. Harry noticed Hermione at one point start to make a comment about what Neville packed, then stop herself; he

wondered whether this was part of her effort to change the way she dealt with Neville. Harry half-seriously called Hermione over to ask which of his slowly growing collection of books he should take in his trunk, though he knew that if he didn't take a book and needed it later, he could always take Fawkes back to the Burrow and get it. Also, he knew that Dumbledore had a small library of personal books which was now his, in his quarters. He told Hermione she should feel free to visit his quarters any time and look at them, knowing that she would, and fill him in on the contents later. He knew he should look at them himself, but he never seemed to have the time. One of these days, he told himself.

After he finished packing, he took his trunk downstairs and sat on the sofa next to Ron. Hermione and Ginny were also there; Neville and Pansy were still packing. "So strange," mused Ron. "It's the last time we'll be doing this. It always feels like such a big day... still does, I suppose, but other things seem bigger now."

"You mean, like Quidditch?" teased Hermione.

Ron smiled. "Yes, exactly. Actually, I'm pretty confident about our chances this year. We've won twice in a row, and nobody else is that strong. If the Hufflepuffs get a decent Seeker, they could be a threat, but I still think we could beat them."

"Hard to argue with that," Harry agreed. "Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you yesterday... at the teachers' meeting, Snape asked me to choose this year's Slytherin team."

"And you said 'no,' right?" asked Ron, as though it were the only sensible answer.

"Sorry, Ron," he replied, and related the details of the conversation. Finishing, he added, "I really didn't feel like I

could say no. Not because of what he said, but... I don't know, it just seems only fair that every team should have the best players it can."

"And he would have done the same for you, if your positions were reversed," said Ron sarcastically.

"I know he wouldn't have, but I don't want to be that petty," said Harry. "It did surprise me, though, that Madam Hooch thinks she couldn't choose the team well enough. I wondered if she just didn't do it because she doesn't want Snape blaming her if they don't do well."

"Or, maybe because she just doesn't like him," suggested Ron. "Can't imagine why, with the charming personality he has."

Harry exchanged brief but meaningful glances with Ginny and Hermione, knowing they were all thinking that Ron might not say that if he understood Snape's situation. Harry knew that normally he would have made a remark agreeing with Ron, but he decided to try to change the subject. "Hard to say. I still think we won't have any problems, though, since they probably won't be that good at first. With our two Firebolts, we're going to be hard to beat."

"Not to mention," added Ron, "a Chaser who scored twenty-one goals last time, and a Seeker who could play on the Quidditch World Cup team." Harry shot Ron a look that was part anger, part sadness. Ron sighed. "Look, Harry, it is true. That twit Woodridge may have messed it up for you, but I really do think you would have made it anyway."

"I think he knows that, Ron, at least at some level," said Ginny, obviously sympathetic to how Harry felt. "It just reminds him of it, is all." To Harry, she added, "I guess you

probably won't be able to enjoy the World Cup when it happens this summer, because of this."

"I don't know," said Harry. "England may not make the finals anyway, then it wouldn't matter so much. I suppose I'll know how I feel when the time comes."

"It seems safe to say that we'll get to sit in the Top Box again," said Hermione.

"I'm not sure," said Harry. "I'm not about to go to people and say, 'I'm Harry Potter, so give me good tickets.' Even if someone offers, I'm not sure I'd want to take them. I don't want people thinking I owe them something."

"Harry, I think she means the Aurors," pointed out Ron.

"Oh... right," said Harry sheepishly.

"Don't worry, Harry, we know you aren't going to trade on your fame, nor would we want you to," an amused Hermione assured him.

"I don't know... Top Box..." mused Ron, deadpan, then glanced at Harry for a reaction, which Harry gave him by rolling his eyes.

"As his future wife, I could trade on his name," teased Ginny. Adopting a dainty, helpless tone, she said, "Excuse me, but I'm the future Mrs. Harry Potter, is there any way you could possibly..." She stopped, enjoying Harry's annoyed expression, as Ron and Hermione laughed.

"That voice is really not you," said Harry humorously.

"Well, how about this," she said, switching to a seductive tone as she walked to the sofa and sat on his lap, arms

around his neck. "Is this me?" She kissed him vigorously as Ron hastily moved further away on the sofa.

"It sounds like her," said Hermione, smiling. "What do you think, Ron?"

"I don't know, I'm trying not to look," responded Ron, with an exaggerated nervous expression.

Trunk over her shoulder, Pansy walked down the stairs, and chuckled when she saw Harry and Ginny. "I see things down here are as usual. Ron, why do you never kiss me like that?"

"You mean, in front of an audience?" retorted Ron. "Besides, she's the one kissing him." As Ginny continued the kiss, Harry reflected that little he did was without at least a potential audience, so it didn't seem to matter much.

"It looks like he's an active participant," said Pansy, as Ginny finally broke off the kiss. "But I'll keep that in mind." She raised her eyebrows and smiled at Ron.

Harry looked into Ginny's eyes. "Yes, that was definitely you," he agreed, as she slid off his lap, remaining very close to him.

"Sorry, Ron," said Ginny. "Well, not really. Just getting in one more, since it'll be much tougher once we're back at Hogwarts."

"Yes, you would never have done it otherwise," cracked Ron. "You're so reserved about that most of the time. Now can someone tell me again, why we're taking Fawkes to King's Cross, but not just taking him straight to Hogwarts?"

"Tradition, Ron," said Hermione earnestly. "This is our last chance to do this, at least in this direction. There are so

many memories associated with this, it'll be nice. We can look at the countryside, buy stuff off the trolley..."

"Buy Chocolate Frogs, hoping to get Harry's card," grinned Ron, as Harry tried not to react.

"Oh, that's right, you'd better take a quill, Harry," said Hermione, opening her trunk to look for one. "They'll be doing a huge business in Chocolate Frog cards, and if anyone gets yours, they'll want it autographed. Or, some people might have gotten them during the summer."

"Ah, yes, tradition," said Ron, now enjoying himself. "Harry walking up and down the train, signing autographs. The fond memories..."

"I know," said Harry. "We'll get there early, get a compartment in the back of the train, and I'll hide there for the whole trip."

"Come on, Harry, it'll be fine," Pansy assured him. "There won't be that many looking for your autograph." Harry wasn't so sure, and remained firm in his intention to stay in his compartment. He wondered if he could go five hours without going to the bathroom.

Neville came down, Molly and Arthur came in, and they all talked until ten-forty, at which time Harry wanted to leave. The others agreed, and Molly made the rounds, giving everyone a hug and a kiss. "Now, you all take care of each other," she said, obviously worried.

"We always do," Ginny assured her.

"And keep in touch," instructed Molly. "If there's anything happening, call me from the fireplace in Harry's office."

"We will," said Ginny.

"And look after Pansy especially, she's all alone in Slytherin."

Pansy smiled. "Really, Molly, I'll be all right. I mean, I don't have friends like them in Slytherin, of course, but after April, it was fine. I'm not isolated."

"Also, we've worked out a system to compensate for the fact that she can't be with us in Gryffindor," explained Hermione. "The other five of us usually sit together in the common room and do homework; we'll do that, and Pansy can sit on her bed and do homework, and have an open pendant channel to the rest of us. We'll be able to hear her, and she us."

"Well, that's very nice, I'm glad you can use the pendants for something like that," said Molly. "Okay, I could probably think of ten other things to tell you, but you'd be late for the train. So, go ahead." Harry felt bad for her, she looked so sad to see them go.

"Have a good term, everyone," said Arthur.

"Okay, how are we going to do this," wondered Ron. "I guess two trips, three of us each?"

"Sounds right," agreed Harry. "Who first?"

"How about you three," suggested Ginny, motioning to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "You're the founding members of the group, you should go together."

"I never thought of it quite that way," said Harry. "But, all right." He slung his lightened trunk over his shoulder, and picked up Hedwig's cage. Hermione scooped up

Crookshanks, but Ron paused as he was about to pick up his trunk, looking lost in thought. Then he walked over to Pansy and kissed her, in much the same way Ginny had kissed Harry a short time ago. The others exchanged pleased glances, and when Ron and Pansy finished, Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville broke into applause. Slightly pink with embarrassment, Ron walked back over to Harry and Hermione. He picked up his trunk and Pigwidgeon's cage in one hand, and put the other around Harry's shoulders as Hermione did the same. Harry gave Molly and Arthur a wave goodbye before grasping Fawkes's tail. Fawkes took off, and they were gone.

The first thing Harry heard was a gasp, then a few others, as people on Platform 9 3/4 reacted to the sudden appearance of a phoenix bearing three people. Harry would have preferred to make a less conspicuous entrance, but using Fawkes had been the best thing to do from a security point of view. Harry let go of Fawkes, who disappeared, returning in a few seconds with Neville, Ginny, and Pansy. As they made their way along the platform toward the end of the train, Harry was intercepted by the mother of an embarrassed-looking Hufflepuff third-year boy; the woman asked whether Harry would be teaching his new spells. Harry asked the rest to go on without him as he answered her question, but Ginny stayed with him as the others moved off.

He and Ginny found the others five minutes later, in the last compartment of the last car. "Here you go, Harry, this is about as secluded as it gets," said Hermione.

"Thanks, I could use some seclusion right about now," said Harry as he took a seat next to Hermione.

"I guess so," she said sympathetically. "That woman kept you all that time?"

"No, there was another one," said Ginny. "The mother of a first-year girl, same question, of course. You should have seen the look on the daughter's face, she was looking up at Harry with awe. It was really cute." Hermione and Pansy chuckled at Harry's discomfort with Ginny's description.

"I tried to be polite, but I really didn't want to spend all day explaining to them exactly what's involved," said Harry. "Especially the second woman... I didn't want to say, 'there's no way I'm going to try to teach this to first years,' but it's close to the truth."

"Well, you're safe now, and we'll Stun anyone who tries to come in here and talk to you," said Ginny.

"Ah, if only you meant that," responded Harry.

"We should head up to the front, sit with the prefects," said Hermione, as Ron and Pansy got up along with her. "We'll be back in an hour or so."

"Say hello to the new Head Boy for me," said Harry.

Hermione chuckled. "I will." She picked up Crookshanks, and left the compartment with the others.

They sat in silence for a minute, enjoying the atmosphere and looking out the window at the still-busy platform. Ginny turned to Neville, sitting next to her. "How do you feel, Neville? About going back to school?"

Neville considered the question. "Funny, usually I used to be scared, or worrying that I forgot something. Now, classes don't seem so important. Protecting Harry, helping the

Aurors if we get called, that's what feels important. The rest is just... something we're doing in the meantime." He paused, then continued. "You know... if you take out that one day, that one night... except for that whole thing, this was the best summer of my life." He looked up at them, his shyness reasserting itself momentarily. "I got to spend it with the rest of you, I got to do something useful. It was really good."

Touched, Ginny reached over and put an arm around Neville's shoulders. "Thanks. We're really glad you feel that way." Letting go, she asked, "Neville, you don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but... how are you doing, with what happened with Lestrage?"

Harry had wondered that as well, but hadn't wanted to ask; he wondered if she felt that he might be more open with fewer people around. Neville paused again. "A lot better. It's taken a while; it's obviously pretty hard to get past what she did, what kind of person she is. But I know, at least I assume, that if I want to use the energy of love, I can't wish her dead. I have to know I wouldn't torture her again if I could, no matter what she'd done. I asked Ron, and he said he wasn't sure whether it was overcoming his embarrassment at saying 'I love you' or giving up on the idea of torturing or killing Malfoy that did it for him, but I have a feeling that Harry's right when he says that you can't feel that way and use the energy of love. I'm almost certain I couldn't use the shield against Lestrage when they were torturing me because I had so much rage. But she really does deserve to die. It was hard not to think that, not to want it."

Harry could definitely understand that, and felt he knew how hard it must have been for Neville. "What really helped was something Kingsley did," said Neville. "A few days after the Apparation crisis was over, also after Skeeter was killed,

Kingsley took me aside. He suggested that I visit Lestrage where she's being kept, he would arrange it so I could see her privately, even though she's supposed to be allowed no visitors, no one to get near her. He said that doing so might help my recovery from what happened. He also said that nobody except Aurors knew that we had her, knew who she was. At first I didn't understand why he was telling me that, but while we were on the way to where they were keeping her, I worked it out." Neville looked at each in turn, his expression very solemn and serious. "Without saying it directly, he was letting me know that if I wanted to, I could kill her. No questions would be asked." Ginny and Harry looked at each other, amazed, then back at Neville.

"I wasn't even sure why I decided to visit her," Neville said, now looking at Harry. "I mean, what could I possibly say to her? And I knew what she would say to me, there would be no point in asking her questions. But I decided to do it. Kingsley pointed me toward where they were keeping her, then left.

"The first thing I did when I saw her was a Silencing spell; I knew I didn't need to hear what she was going to say. She just looked at me, like, you know I'd kill you the second I got the chance. I just didn't say anything for a long time, a few minutes, just stared at her. I wasn't even sure why, I just did. Then I suddenly realized why. Looking at her face all that time, it was... I guess like a mirror of what's inside of her, how empty and terrible it must be in her mind. I didn't feel sorry for her, of course, but... it was just like, something became really clear to me. There's something about her that's really wounded, that's missing. Maybe a conscience, something like that, I'm not sure. I guess if you're a Death Eater, it must be the case that something's really wrong with you, period." Harry couldn't help but think how close Neville was to describing the consequences of the Cleansing.

"Finally, I decided to speak. I said, 'You know, nobody knows you're here but Aurors. I could kill you if I wanted. I could do to you what you did to my parents.' She just looked at me with this expression of, go ahead, do it. I said, 'You seem not to be bothered by the idea, which is a pretty good indication that you're not all right. Any sane person wants to live, wants to not be in pain. Well, I'm not going to do that, because it's what you would do, and the last thing I want is to be like you. Looking into your eyes for a few minutes is enough to tell me that. When Voldemort was attacking Harry in his dreams, in one of them Harry said that he pitied Voldemort. I didn't understand why he said that then, but I do now.' Then I just left. There was nothing else to say, or to understand."

Proud of Neville, Harry just nodded. Ginny reached for him again, pulling him into a hug. "Hermione's very lucky to have you, you know."

Neville smiled, embarrassed. "She said that too, after I told her this. All I know is, I don't think about it so much anymore, I don't feel like I need revenge against her anymore. Pity just seems like the right emotion."

The train suddenly started to move, and they slowly pulled away from the platform. Harry looked out the window and saw parents waving goodbye to their children, some walking along with the train for a few seconds.

They were silent for a minute, then Harry said, "I wonder if Kingsley knew you would do what you did. You might have killed her, for all he knew."

"I have a feeling he knew I wouldn't," said Neville. "I can't be sure, of course."

"If you had, Neville, do you think it would have ended your chances of becoming an Auror?" asked Ginny.

"I don't think so," Neville replied, as Harry had the same thought. "I think if I had, Kingsley would have seen it as justice, and not gotten worked up about it. Considering her history with my family, I think he thought I deserved to have that chance. But Hermione thinks, and this makes sense to me, that he did it partly because he wanted to see what kind of person I was, what I would do. You know how there are these character tests when you become an Auror; she thinks that this was one, just an unscheduled and unofficial one."

"I have a feeling that wasn't what Kingsley intended, but yeah, he probably got the same kind of information he would get from one," said Harry. "But to tell you the truth, Neville, it may be that he wanted to see what kind of person you are, but I think it's more that he wanted *you* to see what kind of person you are."

"That makes sense, too," agreed Neville. "And also, the fact that I had her in my power, I could think of her and remember that instead of all the stuff she's done to me. Like you with Malfoy, when you caught him."

Harry nodded. "Unless they get away, that is."

"They're not likely to," said Neville. "I'm sure you know, some of them, including Malfoy and LeStrange, are being held by the Aurors."

"No, I didn't know that," said Harry. "Why only some of them?"

"The Aurors can't hold them all, they only have about ten," explained Neville, "the ones who they think are most important, might know the most, or have the greater

connection to Voldemort. The rest are being held by other departments of the Ministry. I think they don't assume that Malfoy has any special connection, though, just indirectly through his father. I also think that they're holding him out of consideration for Pansy."

"That would be nice of them," said Ginny. "Neville, since I've already asked you a highly personal question, would it be okay if I asked another?" Harry smiled a little as Neville nodded, conveying by his expression that she could ask anything she wanted. "How's it going with Hermione, how are you two doing?"

"You mean, with our issues after the Skeeter thing," filled in Neville. "I suppose she wouldn't mind if I told you. Fine, but maybe a bit slow. We're both trying to change our habits, and it's kind of hard. Her tendency is to tell me what I should do, and mine is to do what she suggests even if she's not telling me what to do, or to ask her what she thinks when it should be obvious. It's funny, you don't even realize you're doing things like that until you've already done them. Then you look back and say, 'oh, did I do that?' Or you do it, then you realize it the second after you did it. We decided we were going to change how we were, but neither of us realized quite how hard it would be. But at least we're doing it together, so we both know how hard it is, and neither of us gets mad at the other for slipping back into our old habits... well, not usually, but I guess we can get a little irritated if we aren't in a good mood, and it's not that hard for us to rub the other one the wrong way. But usually, we just make jokes about it, and try to do better next time."

"Well, I'm glad it's going okay," said Ginny.

"Yeah, so are we," agreed Neville. "We still kind of shudder to think of what could have happened, if not for the message

we got from Gran." He looked up at Harry, gratitude on his face. "Not that we would have broken up otherwise, but it would have been much harder, we'd have gone through all kinds of grief trying to work it out, whose fault it was, and so on. And that would have been on top of our other problems—mine with Lestrangle, hers with Skeeter. Both of us have had to deal with impulses we'd rather not have, and if we'd been fighting, it would have been so much harder. Instead, we were able to help each other. It's been a pretty hard summer for us, emotionally, but at least we had each other. And, of course, the rest of you. You know, Harry, it meant a lot to her that you never got mad at her or blamed her once, when we thought Skeeter's book and the other stuff was going to happen. She was really vulnerable, and you supported her when you had to have been pretty worried yourself."

"Well, I had my own support system," said Harry, looking at Ginny.

"I distracted him," said Ginny.

Neville burst into giggles, then suddenly stopped. "Sorry. She told me about that, what you meant by that word. I hope that doesn't bother you."

"No, it's all right," Ginny assured him. "Besides, I only started using it because she said that you managed to distract her. I wasn't sure that was what she meant, I just sort of assumed it. I think I was right."

"By the way, where did you guys go to..." Harry trailed off.

Somewhat embarrassed himself, Neville smiled at Harry's embarrassment. "Distract each other? My Auror quarters."

"Really?" asked Harry, eyebrows rising high. "I didn't know that. That was nice of them to let you use it for that."

"I think Kingsley and Cassandra felt bad for me, that Hermione and I didn't have much privacy at the Burrow, and they weren't using the room anyway. We would take the fireplace from the Burrow when nobody was in the living room. Sometimes Aurors would see us walking from their fireplace to the quarters, and they'd smile, but nobody ever said anything. I'd bet Cassandra told them they'd better not."

"Well, I'm glad you had someplace to go," said Harry. To Ginny, he asked, "I assume Ron and Pansy used the girls' bedroom?"

"Yes, but they used the boys' bedroom when you two were off doing Auror training," replied Ginny. "Made more sense."

"That's true," said Harry. "At least they got some privacy sometimes. That's going to be pretty lacking at Hogwarts, looks like it's back to the couples' places."

"Can't you still use your quarters?" asked Neville, surprised. "You can take Fawkes there, nobody has to know."

"That's not really clear to me," said Harry. "I know it was okay during the summer, but during the school year, I'm not sure how McGonagall would feel about it. It may be that she would think we shouldn't use it for that, or it may be that she'll just turn a blind eye towards it. I'm just not comfortable doing that, especially imagining a situation where she's looking for me, and that's where we are."

"Obviously, Harry and I differ slightly on this topic," said Ginny, giving him a teasing look. "I'm willing to take more risks than he is, but I do reluctantly understand why he feels this way. He is a Head of House, after all, and has to set an example. And that's probably not quite the example he wants to set."

"I wouldn't care, personally," clarified Harry. "I just worry about what McGonagall would think. Just for myself, students could spend all the time they wanted in the couples' places, or private rooms for all I care."

"Now, there's a very enlightened attitude," remarked Justin Finch-Fletchley, stepping into the compartment, with Susan Bones right behind him. "Makes me wish I were a Gryffindor."

Harry smiled. "Hi, Justin, Susan, have a seat." He moved over as Justin sat next to him, Susan sitting opposite, next to Neville.

"Don't worry, we'll leave when the others come back," said Susan. "We know the other three aren't here just because they're in the prefects' car. We were just there, saying hello to people. You should go say hi, Harry."

Neville and Ginny laughed. "That would involve him walking the length of the train, which is exactly what he's trying to avoid," explained Ginny. To Harry's further embarrassment, she told Justin and Susan about him being stopped on the platform, and imitated the awed look the first year had given him, making everyone but Harry laugh. "I'd love to see the faces of his first year students at the beginning of his first class."

"I'll be sure to show you in the Pensieve, the next time I feel like being made fun of," said Harry. Turning to Justin and Susan, he asked, "So, how are you two doing? Have you had a good summer, since the party?"

"Yes, we did, especially since the party," said Justin, smiling and taking Susan's hand. "The four of us ended up going out to dinner afterwards, and one thing led to another..."

"Oh, that's great!" said Ginny enthusiastically, as Harry nodded. "So, you two are..."

"Seeing each other," supplied Justin.

"Not getting the Joining of Hands done anytime soon, though," added Susan, with a smile.

Harry tried not to roll his eyes. "You know, just because Ginny and I did it, doesn't mean that we think--"

"I know, Harry," Susan interrupted him. "I'm kind of teasing both you and Justin."

"But that's why I was interested in what you said about the couples' places," said Justin. "And the concept of 'private rooms' is definitely intriguing."

Harry chuckled. "I'll be in trouble if it gets back to McGonagall that I even said that. Well, not really in trouble, but she wouldn't think it was funny, let's put it that way."

Justin and Susan stayed for a half hour, catching up with the others on news. Harry discovered that Susan's aunt was a friend of Bright's ("a political friend, not so much a personal friend," she clarified), and had supported him for Minister of Magic, so Susan was interested to hear Harry's impressions of Bright. Justin related that Ernie was getting "a little puffed up" about being Head Boy, but was confident that Ernie would get over it in time. Neville told them that Hermione's summer had been difficult enough that she had no chance to get puffed up about anything, but he gave no details.

Ron, Hermione, and Pansy came back a little over an hour after the train had left the station. The trolley came by shortly after that, and they all bought food. Ron teased Harry by buying five Chocolate Frogs, but to Harry's relief,

his card wasn't included in any of them. When the trolley came by again two hours later Ron tried to buy more, but to his great amusement discovered that they were sold out. His grin at Harry's expense grew wider when the woman pushing the trolley said that they had stocked five times the usual amount of Chocolate Frogs. "They must be trying to get the Merlin card," said Ron. "Yes, that must be it." Then an hour later, to his friends' further amusement, Harry relented and finally got up to go to the bathroom. A few people waved to him, but no one stopped him or asked him to sign his Chocolate Frog card.

Five hours into the trip, Neville looked out the window carefully. "We must be almost there," he said. He slid down in his seat and looked up out the window. "Oh, I just got a glimpse of one of the Aurors." Crookshanks, as if having understood, jumped onto Neville's lap and looked where he was looking.

"There are Aurors out there?" asked Ginny, surprised.

"Sure," replied Neville. "Four of them, on brooms of course, at all times. It's pretty well understood that this train would be a huge target, both because it has Harry and the rest of us, and because it has three hundred people, who they'd love to kill all at once. They accompanied the train to and from Hogwarts last year, as well."

"But that only helps if the train is attacked," said Hermione. "What if they'd put a bomb on the tracks, set it to go off when the train passed it?"

"I don't know," admitted Neville, "but I'm sure they thought of that. I would say that's not something that Voldemort would try, except for what he did with Crabbe and Goyle. Anyway, my guess is that they wouldn't bother trying, since

the train is such an obvious target that they have to imagine that the Aurors would have it well protected. I think when they try something, it'll be in a way and at a time that we won't be expecting."

There was a pause, then Harry commented, "It'll be kind of nice this year, I'll get to sit at the teachers' table for the whole ceremony, not like last year. I missed the Sorting Hat's song and the Sorting last year. At least--"

The compartment door opened and Hedrick and Helen burst in, clearly having run. "Professor!" exclaimed Hedrick.

Harry was slightly alarmed, as were the others. "What is it?"

"We just found out, we heard people talking... some first years... one of the first years on the train is named Marcus Avery," said Hedrick breathlessly. "Some people are saying his father is a Death Eater."

Concerned, Harry exchanged glances with the others. "His father is one of the ones you named in that article for that Quibbler magazine," added Helen.

The name was familiar to Harry, of course. "Do we know for sure that that's his father? Could it be someone else with the same last name?"

"We don't know for sure," admitted Helen. "But I heard that someone asked him what his father did, and he wouldn't say, just said he didn't know. That sounds pretty suspicious."

"This is really bad, Professor," said Hedrick, whose expression suggested to Harry that Hedrick felt he was understating the case. "We thought there were no more of them, and now, there's one more... he could be under the

Imperius Curse, he could have a bomb... what are we going to do?"

"First, let's not panic," said Harry firmly. "We have no idea what the situation is. I'm sure Professor McGonagall knew this when he was invited to attend Hogwarts. His family situation could be different, he could be being raised by someone else, for all we know." Hedrick and Helen still looked very anxious. "Look, I'll start looking into it tonight, I promise. I'll talk to Professor McGonagall, and to the Aurors if necessary, find out more about his background. But I really don't think he has a bomb or anything like that. He's only eleven, and even if they had control of him, they wouldn't consider him reliable. They would wait to try to use him. If he is the son of that Avery, he'll probably get put in Slytherin. Pansy, you can check him out after the Sorting. Talk to all the first years, see how he seems." Pansy nodded.

"Is there anything we can do, sir?" asked Helen.

Harry thought for a minute. "Yes, there is. Be friendly to him."

Helen and Hedrick gaped. "What??" asked Hedrick.

"Listen to me," instructed Harry. "This is very serious." He made sure he had their complete attention, then continued. "It's true that he may be a tool for the Death Eaters. But he also may not be. It may be that his father wants him to help the Death Eaters, but he doesn't want to. Anything could be the case. We have to imagine that there's a chance that if they're telling him to do things, that he doesn't want to. There's a chance that they want him to be a Death Eater in the future, but he doesn't want to. If other Slytherins treat him badly, suspiciously, excluding him because of his name, he'll be angry and upset, and that'll push him to want to be

a Death Eater. Death Eaters thrive on negative emotions. But if he makes friends, if he's treated like everyone else, if he has good experiences, he might see an alternative to being a Death Eater in the future. My point is, right now, we just don't know. It's not going to hurt to give it a try. I'm not saying be extra nice to him, nicer than the other first years, but just treat him the same way you'd treat any other first year. Talk to all of them, be friendly with them. It's the best thing to do, and if he is a danger, doing that will probably help you find out faster, as well. Let's just find out what's going on first."

"He's right," added Pansy. "Look at me, I used to be pretty nasty before I decided I wanted to change, and Harry trusted me, gave me a chance when he didn't have to. We have to find out what he wants to do. He may not know yet, and it's better to encourage him in the right direction. Do you think you can do that?"

Hedrick and Helen looked at each other, clearly finding the suggestion a hard one to get used to. "We'll try," said Helen. "We'll go back to the others, tell them what you said."

Pansy nodded. "Thank you. I'll talk to you all tonight, after the Sorting and the feast. We'll all go to the boys' dormitory, have a talk about this. Okay?"

They slowly nodded, and started to leave. "Hedrick, Helen... thanks for letting us know about this," said Harry. "I know you're concerned for me, and I appreciate it. I promise, I don't take it lightly." They nodded again, and left the compartment.

Harry looked at the others. "Well, what do we think?"

He expected Hermione to respond first, but she didn't. "I think you did the right thing," said Neville. "Obviously we

have to be concerned, but you didn't emphasize that so much because they're already very concerned."

"No point getting them more worked up than they already are," agreed Harry. "And that was a good idea, Pansy, talking to them later."

"I just want to make sure they're all on board," she said. "Those two will go back and tell them what we said, but it won't have the same effect as hearing it from us. About the situation, yeah, I'm a little concerned. After last year, it'd be stupid not to be. But I really don't think they're going to use an eleven-year-old for that kind of thing. Like you said, too unreliable. If they thought he was going to be an asset, they'd wait, give everyone some time to get used to him. So even if nothing happens at first, we still have to keep an eye open."

"The second years are going to do that, no matter what," said Harry. "But yes, you're definitely right. I just hope the other seconds, or even the firsts, don't start treating him badly once they find out."

The train started slowing down. "Ah, almost there," said Ron. "Should be seeing Hagrid any time now."

"Well," said Harry, "instead of taking the carriages, I think I'll have Fawkes take me into the castle. I want to ask Professor McGonagall about Avery, and see if I have time to talk to Archibald about my chat with Bright yesterday. I suppose I could talk to him tonight, but I'd rather just go to Gryffindor Tower after the feast. There may be enough time."

"One of us is going to have to take a different carriage than the others," pointed out Hermione. "They only seat four."

"Pansy could sit on Ron's lap," suggested Ginny.

Pansy chuckled on seeing Ron's annoyed glance at his sister. "I'm sure you'll work something out," said Harry. The train came to a complete stop, and the others let Harry go first to get his trunk and Hedwig. He stepped out of the train and opened Hedwig's cage, knowing as she flew off that she would go to the Hogwarts owlery. He waved at Hagrid, and grabbed Fawkes's tail.

In his dormitory, Harry put down his trunk and Hedwig's cage, and mentally thanked Fawkes for taking him. He walked out of the dormitory into the empty common room, imagining it full, as it would be later in the evening. He walked over to the portrait hole and swung the portrait aside, then climbed through.

"How did you get in?" asked the Fat Lady, annoyed.

"Magic," said Harry over his shoulder.

"If he can do that, there's not much point in my being here, is there?" the Fat Lady said to herself as he walked away.

Harry knocked on the door of McGonagall's quarters, having found her location on his Hogwarts map made by Hermione last year. The door opened. "Ah, Harry come in," McGonagall greeted him. "I see you decided to skip the carriages this year."

"There was something I wanted to ask you about, and then I wanted to talk to Archibald about my meeting last night. Bright said he was going to talk to you too, how did that go?"

"Just fine, thank you. But his meeting with me was an afterthought, for the sake of courtesy. You were the one he came to see."

"That seems hard to believe," Harry protested. "You're important; you're the Hogwarts headmistress, and you help lead the Order."

"Yes, but I do not have political influence, as you do," McGonagall explained patiently. "My words will not move people to action, or sway public opinion. In any case, Harry, I am sorry to be inhospitable, but there are things I must do before the ceremony. What did you wish to ask me about?"

He quickly explained what the second years had said about Avery. She nodded. "Yes, his father is the Death Eater. We did look into the situation, of course. The father seems to have separated from the mother; he apparently left when Voldemort returned, and has not been back to her since. We made a few discreet inquiries, and discovered that the mother has told those she knows that she did not know her husband was a Death Eater, and was appalled to find out. We do not know for certain that this is true, but it is verifiable that the father has had little or no contact with Marcus for over two years. Professor Snape and I find it highly unlikely that Voldemort will try to use him as he used Crabbe and Goyle last year. We assume that he will be Sorted into Slytherin, and if so, Professor Snape intends to observe the situation closely."

"Okay, thanks," he said, satisfied. "I was sure you knew about it, but I just wanted to know what was going on. I'll let you get back to the stuff you have to do." He quickly exited her quarters.

He found Dentus in his quarters, and talked to him for fifteen minutes. Apart from his amazement in discovering that Bright was a Legilimens, Dentus found nothing remarkable about their conversation. His main comment was regarding Bright's statement that he felt it necessary to do the

politically popular thing ninety percent of the time; Dentus felt that Bright was exaggerating. "Ministers have substantial power, as you know. He could do the 'right thing' more than ten percent of the time. I think it would be more appropriate to say that the more important the issue is, the more he'll suffer if people aren't happy with what he does. What he said to you is a highly defensible opinion, but my strong impression is that he's trying to lower your expectations, so you'll appreciate it more if he does some 'right' thing you ask him to do. But he knows I'll be telling you the political ins and outs of any given situation." When Harry relayed his favorable impression of Bright, Dentus nodded and said, "I told you, he's good. Now we just have to wait and see what he actually does, with regard to fighting Voldemort." Harry agreed that though it hadn't come up in the conversation, that would be a large part of how he would decide whether or not he approved of Bright.

It was ten minutes before the ceremony was to begin. Harry headed to the Hall, ready to take his seat a little early, but stopped at the room in which he had waited for Dumbledore's dog at this time last year. He looked into his hand. "Where are you?" he asked.

"Sitting in the Hall, we just got here a few minutes ago," Ginny replied.

"Are any of the teachers sitting at the table yet?"

"A few," she replied. "Sprout, John, Sinistra, and Flitwick. Oh, here comes Vector. Why?"

"It's still a little early, I just wanted to make sure if I went and sat down, I wouldn't be the only one. I'm surprised Snape's not there."

"He's the deputy headmaster now," she pointed out. "He'll be meeting the first years as they get off the boats, and taking them up here."

The thought 'those poor first years' flashed through Harry's head, and he wondered if she had the thought too, and neither said it because Snape could view it later. "That's right, I forgot," he said. "Well, I guess I'll go out there. Too bad I can't talk to you like this from my seat at the teachers' table."

In his palm, he saw her smile. "No, it wouldn't look good," she agreed. "We'll save a spot for you, you can join us for some of the feast. I love you."

"I love you, too," he said, and put down his hand. He walked out to the teachers' table, looking for the nameplate indicating his spot. He found it to the left of the podium, near the end, between Sprout and John. He greeted them both, then looked out into the Hall. It was dark outside, and as always, the ceiling was enchanted to look like the night sky; many stars were visible. Also as usual, hundreds and hundreds of candles hovered high in the air, providing light; he wondered whether in addition to being charmed to hover, they had also been charmed not to drip wax onto the heads of the students below.

Harry chatted with John, telling him about the computer he and his friends had bought for the Burrow and relating Arthur's excitement about it. John laughed, finding it easy to imagine. "I wish I could have a computer here, just to show people in my classes how it works, but electronic equipment doesn't work around Hogwarts."

Hagrid came into the Hall and made his way up to the teachers' table, saying hello to Harry and the others as he

walked by them to his seat. Other teachers drifted in; McGonagall and Trelawney arrived at about the same time, and everyone was there. Within seconds, the Great Hall's doors opened, and in walked Snape, followed by about forty intimidated-looking first years. They walked up to an area near the teachers' table, off to Harry's left. Harry now saw the familiar stool, the Sorting Hat on it, looking as old and worn as ever.

Many first years gasped as the Hat opened its... it wasn't a mouth, thought Harry, but he thought of it as one. It started its song, which seemed to Harry to be a lot less jaunty than in other years. The Hat sang:

For near a thousand years now

I've performed this simple chore

To sing of Hogwarts' history

While trying not to bore

And then you'll put me on your heads

I know not what I'll find

But once you do, I'll take a little

Peek inside your mind

I'll get a look at who you are

And very soon I'll know

What your talents are, and then

Into which House you'll go

*The ones who'll go to Ravenclaw
Are clever, sharp, and fast
The ones who'll go to Gryffindor
Have courage unsurpassed
The ones who'll go to Hufflepuff
Give everyone a chance
The ones who'll go to Slytherin
Know just how to advance
Now, o'er the years and centuries
Advancement's been our aim
But generations come and go
And magic's much the same
A brand-new potion here and there
An upgrade for a charm
A few new uses for a plant
A new way to disarm
But one time in a great long while
There comes a seismic shift
The world of magic shakes and stirs
There's continental drift*

*From chaos unexpectedly
An island will appear
Where kindness, love, and peace of mind
Make everything so clear
And anyone, from any House
This island you can find
The energy, the path, is
In your heart and in your mind
The trail's already been blazed
By one, and then by five
And many more now have the chance
To seek, and find, and thrive
In centuries I've never sung
A song just quite like this
But so rare an opportunity'd
Be such a shame to miss
So keep in mind that you may know
What you think you do not
And what you think that you don't have
You have already got*

A chill ran through Harry as the Hat stopped singing. He asked himself, did that song mean what I think it meant? He almost couldn't believe it. He glanced down the table at the other teachers, most of whom were looking at him. Then they started applauding the Hat, as was customary, and he joined them, feeling awkward doing so.

He felt his hand tingle. "Can you believe that?" he heard Ginny say, obviously as amazed as he was. "That song was about the energy of love!" He felt he couldn't reply in his hand, as he was in full view of many students, and because of the song was probably being looked at more anyway. He found he was looking forward to reviewing the song in the Pensieve later, as he had only gradually realized what it was about as he was listening.

Snape looked nonplused, but recovered quickly, and turned to face the first years. "Your names will be called in alphabetical order. When your name is called, sit on the stool and put on the Hat. When the Hat announces the name of your new House, take off the Hat, place it back on the stool, and proceed to the proper table." He picked up a parchment scroll, and read the first name.

"Avery, Marcus!"

A small boy, though average-sized for his age, stepped forward. He had light brown hair and slightly narrow eyes. He sat on the stool and put on the Hat, looking nervous, but no more nervous than the other first years. The Hat paused for ten seconds, then fifteen, then twenty; Harry found it a good sign that the Hat hadn't put him into Slytherin instantly, as it had Malfoy. Finally reaching a decision, it shouted, "Slytherin!" The Slytherin table applauded, though in a somewhat more reserved way than they had in years

past, Harry felt. He wondered how many of them had heard about Avery's father.

Snape read the next name. "Barrington, Joseph!"

A slightly larger boy with black hair walked up to the stool, and excitedly put the Hat on his head. This time, the Hat only paused for a few seconds. "Huff--"

With the suddenness of a light being turned off, two things happened simultaneously: the Hat went silent, and all of the hovering candles plummeted to the floor.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 10, Lutas: Responsibility falls on Harry and his friends to defend a nearly-defenseless Hogwarts, as Voldemort again attacks multiple targets simultaneously.

From Chapter 10: "You will retreat NOW," shouted Harry, "or in five seconds I'll Apparate you off to St. Mungo's!" As he glared at Snape, it fleetingly crossed his mind that his anger was motivated by genuine concern for Snape's safety; he realized he would be upset if anything happened to Snape. I wonder when that happened, he thought. With an angry glare back at Harry, Snape turned and jogged away, looking behind him as he did.

10. Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Lutas

Harry saw many robes start to catch fire, and heard a few dozen screams. He didn't know whether he was on fire, but he reflexively grabbed his wand and performed the fire-suppression charm on himself. Looking around, he saw that half of the teachers' robes were on fire, including John's; he turned his attention to John because he knew that John couldn't do magic. John thanked him quickly, then yanked off his robes and used them to smother the fire spreading on Sprout's back.

Looking down the line of teachers, Harry saw them using their wands, but it seemed to be having no effect; they were still on fire, and if anything, the flames were increasing. The first years looked terrified; some were starting to catch fire, and a few were screaming. Snape was pointing his wand at them, but nothing seemed to be happening. Harry took a few steps over and quickly put out whatever fires he saw, ending with Snape, who had just started noticing that his robes were on fire as well. Harry then ran along the teachers' table, quickly using the charm on everyone who needed it.

Harry looked out into the Hall, at the students' tables. There was still screaming, and he saw some people on fire, running desperately, and a few rolling on the floor. He rushed to the students' tables, baffled by the fact that hardly anyone seemed to be using the fire-suppression charm. It's a third-year spell, he thought, most everyone should know it. But the flames, and the screams, only increased, fueling Harry's adrenaline. He moved to the nearest students' table, which

was Gryffindor, and saw Ron and Ginny busily putting out fires there, so he ran to the other side of the room. He ran the length of the Slytherin table, putting out fires as he went while dodging and helping panicked students, until he ran into Pansy doing the same thing. They moved to the Ravenclaw table as Harry saw the fires getting worse; several large sections of tables were now on fire, flames rising a few feet, and he could see a dozen people who looked like human torches. He knew that people would start dying, from burns or asphyxiation, in the next few seconds if something wasn't done, and he couldn't cover the tables fast enough.

Desperate, he decided to try the fire-suppression charm as an area-effect spell. He had never heard of it being used that way, but it had to work, it just had to. He pointed his wand at the Ravenclaw table, and fires in a ten-yard diameter suddenly went out. Thank God, he said to himself as he started to cough. He applied it as quickly as he could to the parts of the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables at which the fires enveloping people were the worst. As he did so, he noticed that all of the Gryffindor fires were out, and saw Hermione and Neville working on a part of the Hufflepuff table. Using the area-effect spell about twice a second, sometimes pointing to fairly distant areas, he extinguished the rest of the fires in about five seconds.

There were still some screams, screams of pain from those who had been badly burned, and the air was thick with smoke. Standing in the center of the Hall, he heard McGonagall shout, "Harry! Get up here!" He ran to the teachers' table as he heard her shout again. "Any student whose magic is working, come to the teachers' table immediately!" As he ran, Harry thought, what does she mean, whose magic is working? When does magic not work? He suddenly remembered Hagrid's problem from yesterday,

and felt sick to his stomach. This was done to us, he realized. How, he had no idea, but he knew it had to have been done deliberately.

Hermione and Neville reached the teachers' table at the same time as he did, followed by Ginny a second later; Ron and Pansy ran up a few seconds after that. "You six," said McGonagall. "No coincidence, obviously. None of the teachers can do magic, and it appears that you are the only students who can."

Madam Pomfrey rushed into the Hall, stopping near McGonagall. "Minerva, what—"

"Fires, Poppy, and very few of us can use magic. Get out there and identify the worst off. Harry, please put Fawkes at her disposal, have him take her to St. Mungo's so she can alert them to prepare to receive wounded."

"Minerva, I can't take people to St. Mungo's using Fawkes, I would have to carry them, and their burns—"

"I know, just use him to alert them, then come back and start triage. Harry, can you still Apparate within Hogwarts?" Harry Apparated to a spot a few feet away. "Good, you must escort the wounded designated by Madam Pomfrey to St. Mungo's." Fawkes burst into view as McGonagall was talking, and in seconds, he and Madam Pomfrey were gone.

"Of course I will, Professor, but Hogwarts is under attack, it must be," said Harry, shouting without realizing it. "I have to go alert the Aurors before I take anyone to St. Mungo's, and unless—"

"Very well, go," interrupted McGonagall. "Do it very quickly, and report to me upon your return."

Harry Disapparated, and was suddenly in the Apparation detection room, ignoring the startled glances of Aurors. "Quick, who's in charge?" Harry shouted.

Dawlish came running in from the standby room. "What's going on?"

"Magic suddenly stopped working at Hogwarts, we don't know why," Harry reported briskly. "We don't know how far it extends, maybe into Hogsmeade. Everyone was in the Hall, the candles fell, lots of burns. Fires are out now. My friends and I, the six of us can still do magic, but no one else. I assume there may be an attack on Hogwarts soon."

Shouting at someone Harry couldn't see, Dawlish said, "Full alert! Call in everyone!" To Harry, he said, "Probably with Muggle weapons, maybe Muggles using them. All right, get back to Hogwarts, we're on it. You and your friends defend Hogwarts from the inside, pay special attention to the gate; that's where they'll attack, if they do."

"McGonagall wants me Apparating the wounded to St. Mungo's, I'm the only one who can," Harry pointed out.

"Tell her I said, only life-and-death cases once an enemy is spotted," instructed Dawlish. "Six of you isn't much to defend a castle, we need all of you. We'll do what we can from Hogsmeade. Go."

In an instant, Harry was back at Hogwarts, near the teachers' table. He took a few steps toward McGonagall and his five friends, who Snape had just joined. "Dawlish is mobilizing the Aurors, they're going to go to Hogsmeade and do what they can from there. He wants me and the others defending the castle."

Snape spoke. "There will likely be an attack, by some sort of Muggle mercenaries using heavy Muggle weapons."

Harry nodded. "That's what Dawlish thinks, too." To his friends, he said, "Go out to the gate, but not past it. Look around to see if anyone's coming, but don't be obvious targets. Keep the Repulsion Charm on at all times. Ginny, call me on your hand the second you see anything coming, or anything unusual." They nodded, and started running as fast as they could out of the Hall, to the Hogwarts gate.

Harry turned to McGonagall and Snape. "Dawlish said that I should join them as soon as they see an enemy, stop getting people to St. Mungo's unless it's really serious."

"That makes sense," agreed McGonagall, "but keep in mind that you are under my authority, not his. Very well, go to the tables, find Madam Pomfrey, and begin evacuating the wounded."

Harry looked out into the Hall, found Madam Pomfrey, and Apparated to her side. "Good, there you are," she said. "These four first, then a few over there. Look for me when you're done with these." She walked off. Harry looked down at the first victim, a Hufflepuff fourth year, one of those who'd lost two classmates at Hogsmeade. He crouched down and touched him lightly on the shoulder, and yanked his hand away when the boy screamed. Harry knew from things he'd seen on Muggle television how painful burns could be, and said, "I'm sorry, but I have to touch you somewhere. It'll just be for a second." The boy nodded through his pain. Harry touched the other shoulder, no more firmly than he felt he needed to, and as the boy shouted in pain, they were suddenly in the emergency room of St. Mungo's.

Harry looked up to see three uniformed Healers waiting. "It's okay, we've got him," said an older woman with short brown hair, who looked to be in charge. "Just keep bringing them here, we'll send them where they need to go." He saw a Healer cast a spell on the boy, who relaxed visibly. The Healer then touched the boy gently, and they both disappeared. Harry nodded, stood, and was back in the Hall, near the other three students he was to take back. He quickly got them to St. Mungo's as well, taking about five seconds each to do so. He looked for Madam Pomfrey, found her among some Ravenclaws, and Apparated to her side.

"These three," she said, then walked off again. Harry crouched down and winced to see the very pained face of Luna Lovegood. He checked her right hand for burns; finding none, he took it. "It'll be all right, they'll take care of you," he said, suddenly heavy with emotion. In an instant, they were at St. Mungo's.

"I know," she said, in a raspy voice not much louder than a whisper. "Thank you, Professor." He squeezed her hand lightly, wondering if she was being deliberately humorous even through her pain. He let go of her, and she was whisked away as he returned to Hogwarts. The next two Ravenclaws were also sixth year girls.

He evacuated about forty people in the next four minutes, then he felt his hand tingle. Rather than look at it, he immediately Apparated to the Hogwarts gate, ending up just a few feet from his friends. "What?" he asked.

"People coming," reported Hermione. "Through Hogsmeade, on the main street. Looks like at least fifty... no, maybe more," she added as they started getting closer. "They've got weapons, looks like machine guns." Harry was surprised that the Aurors hadn't managed to stop them; apparently

whatever was stopping magic had a greater range than he'd assumed.

"We should hide, wait for them to get into the gate," suggested Ron. "Leap out, Repulsion Charms on."

Hermione winced. "No, Ron. That's too much like murder."

Indignantly, Ron retorted, "And they'll be shooting at us as a kind of greeting?"

"Hermione's right, let's not make this any bloodier than we have to," decided Harry. "We'll Stun, then rope them as they pass through the gate; with any luck, there'll be a pile of bodies they can't get past." Glancing around, he saw Snape, standing about ten feet from Ron. "What are you doing here?" he demanded abruptly.

Snape raised an eyebrow at Harry's tone, but reacted calmly. "The headmistress wished me to observe—"

"Never mind, I don't care," said Harry, getting angry. "Get back, way back. As far as you can and still see. You don't have a Repulsion Charm."

"I will retreat when the mercenaries have reached—"

"You will retreat NOW," shouted Harry, "or in five seconds I'll Apparate you off to St. Mungo's!" As he glared at Snape, it fleetingly crossed his mind that his anger was motivated by genuine concern for Snape's safety; he realized he would be upset if anything happened to Snape. I wonder when that happened, he thought. With an angry glare back at Harry, Snape turned and jogged away, looking behind him as he did.

Harry turned and walked toward the gate for a better look. "Okay, they're not far now, maybe twenty seconds from the gate. Repulsion Charms on, now. Let's get back to--"

There was a sudden explosion very close to them, only a few feet from where Snape had been standing. Harry felt himself knocked back a few steps as he saw Ron, closest to the point of impact, thrown back fifteen feet. "Ron!" screamed Pansy, as she rushed to his side.

"What the hell was that?" Harry asked the others urgently.

"I think there's a tank out there!" shouted Hermione. "I thought I heard something like a motor while you were arguing with Snape. I can't see it, though."

The ground attackers were starting to come through the gate. As Harry made a decision, Fawkes appeared in front of him. "Pansy!" he shouted, getting her attention; she reluctantly left Ron's side and turned to face the gate. "You four work on them, I'll deal with the tank." He grabbed Fawkes's tail with his left hand, wand in the right; Fawkes flew upwards but didn't disappear. He flew over the Hogwarts gate as his friends shot Stunning spells at the attackers. "Repulsion Charms on!" he reminded them from the air, making sure that his covered Fawkes as well. He heard machine gun shots a second after he finished speaking, and saw a half dozen attackers go down, clearly from bullets, not Stunning spells.

Shooting off a few Stunning Spells himself, he heard another explosion, which thankfully happened far enough away from his friends that they were unaffected. Deciding to use a spell Dumbledore had taught him last year, he pointed his wand into the moonlit night, and a wave of bright red came out of his wand. He saw it hit trees... then make clear the outline of

a tank, fifty feet from the Hogwarts gate. He realized the tank had not been invisible, just very hard to see. He heard bullets close to him, and glanced down to see a few more attackers go down, victims of their own bullets.

Harry quickly wondered what to do about the tank; it was too big for any conventional, impact-based spell to do any good. With a sudden inspiration, an image flashed through his mind of a scene from his first year at Hogwarts: Hermione, with a superior expression, causing a feather to rise and float. Can I lift a tank? he wondered, then thought, what's the point of being the strongest wizard in England if I can't put it to good use? Fawkes flew closer to the tank so that Harry wouldn't be a target of the mercenaries' bullets. Harry pointed his wand at the tank, concentrated, and the tank began to rise: one foot, two feet, three feet... When it was ten feet in the air, Harry twisted his wand, and it turned over in the air, now upside down, turret pointed away from the gate. He slowly lowered it, then decided to let it fall the last five feet, to stun the occupant in case he decided to try to shoot, even upside down. The tank came crashing to the ground, metal creaking, tank treads spinning in the air.

Harry turned his attention to the Hogwarts gate. The tank had distracted them enough that they hadn't started firing Stunning spells soon enough, and while a few bodies lay at the gate, many of the attackers had broken through. What looked like thirty or forty bodies were on the ground inside the gate, and more were going down every second, both from Stunning spells and their own bullets. Neville, Hermione, Ginny, and Pansy had formed a tight semicircle around Ron's prone form, clearly to shield him from bullets.

Harry Stunned the last fifteen attackers trying to get through the gate. Only twenty attackers were still standing, and they were going down fast; it amazed Harry that the

attackers still used their machine guns despite seeing dozens of their comrades go down from doing so. He supposed that they thought they were being fired on with machine guns as well. Fawkes flew toward the fighting, and Harry joined his friends in Stunning the ones not being wounded by their own bullets. A few seconds later, no attackers were left standing, and the only sound was the moaning and pained cries of the wounded attackers.

"Professor Snape!" shouted Harry. "It's clear now!" He saw Snape run into the castle, then turned his attention to the others, especially Ron, who seemed to be showing faint signs of movement. Hermione pointed her wand at him, and he blinked, coming awake. He looked around, taking a second to digest the change in his surroundings.

"Ron! Are you all right?" asked an anxious Pansy, gently touching his face.

"Yeah, I am, or at least I will be," he said. "Got a terrible headache, feel like I've been beaten up a bit, but no real injuries, I'm pretty sure."

Neville shot off a Stunning spell at a Stunned attacker who had regained consciousness, then said, "We've got to wrap them up, more might try to get up."

"We can't wrap the wounded ones, they were hit by bullets," argued Hermione. "We have to get them to St. Mungo's."

"First, let's get rid of their weapons," suggested Harry. Seeing a machine gun on the ground, he waved his wand and sent it flying through the air, far from them or the gate. "Everybody do that, make sure they can't wake up and start firing. Not you, Ron, just relax."

"I was relaxing when I was unconscious," protested Ron, but did as he was told. Weapons flew across the grass, and soon a large pile of automatic weapons had formed, well away from where the action had been.

As the last of the weapons flew through the air, McGonagall came running out of the castle, followed by Snape, then fifteen or twenty students, mostly older ones. The students gasped at the bodies littering the ground, though McGonagall didn't react. Harry walked toward her. "It's over for now, but we have to keep an eye on Hogsmeade, the gate in general. We don't know that there couldn't be more."

McGonagall nodded, as Neville Stunned another who tried to get up. "Return to the castle and continue the evacuation. There are at least sixty more who require medical attention."

"But we had to use Repulsion Charms, half of these people were hit by bullets," said Harry, as Hermione nodded in agreement. "Some are probably dead, some might die if we don't get them to a hospital right away."

McGonagall fixed him with a hard stare. "I understand, Professor Potter. You will do as I asked. Report to me for further instructions when Madam Pomfrey tells you there is no one left to take."

Harry was amazed; he knew the people in the castle, while injured and in pain, could wait, while some of the fallen attackers would likely die while he was finishing the evacuation. Granted, they were the enemy, but to let them die when they could be saved? He looked at her for another second, then reluctantly Disapparated.

Apparating and Disapparating as fast as he could, Harry finished the task in seven minutes. When Madam Pomfrey told him there was no one more, he told her about the

wounded outside. "I know, but I'm afraid I'm pretty useless without a wand," she replied. She suggested that he take her to St. Mungo's, where she would talk to the people there about what was to be done with the wounded attackers, then stay to help with the burn victims.

He took her, then reported back to McGonagall. "All done," he said stonily, not bothering to hide his unhappiness with her decision. "Madam Pomfrey is at St. Mungo's."

"Very well," she replied, ignoring his manner. "Anyone here with a visible wound, take to St. Mungo's. After you take the first one, find an Auror at St. Mungo's; there should be two there now. Tell them what you will be doing so they can make arrangements for how these wounded are to be dealt with." Harry walked over to a man who was obviously in pain, knelt and touched his arm, and they were suddenly at St. Mungo's.

He stood. "Where can I find an Auror?" he asked the nearest St. Mungo's worker.

"Just a second," she said, and ran off. A few seconds later, Winston Clark ran up to him. "Harry!"

"Winston, there's a few dozen of them, they fired bullets and we had to use the Repulsion Charm. I'm going to start bringing them here, McGonagall said to tell you so you could decide what to do with them."

Clark nodded. "Okay, thanks. We'll get them to a Muggle military hospital; I'll talk to the other Aurors." He Disapparated, then Harry did as well, back to the Hogwarts gate.

He had moved about half of the wounded attackers to St. Mungo's when suddenly Fawkes appeared in front of him,

Neville holding his tail feathers. "Harry, grab on!" shouted Neville urgently. "The Aurors are under attack from Voldemort and lots of Death Eaters!"

Putting aside his shock that Neville had managed to get to Auror headquarters and find out-had he traveled there using Fawkes?-Harry grabbed the tail with his left hand, putting his wand arm around Neville's shoulder. They were suddenly in a large room in the Auror compound, spells flying through the air, almost a dozen duels going on, the Aurors clearly on the defensive. He had never seen the room before, but he guessed it was one that led to where the Death Eaters held by the Aurors were being kept, and this was a rescue attempt. He instantly put down an anti-Disapparation field; he hoped that Voldemort wasn't wearing his device, but even if he was, he wanted to make sure the fifteen or so Death Eaters with Voldemort didn't get away. Neville joined the fight as Fawkes sang.

Harry pointed his wand at Voldemort, and the beam came out. This time, Voldemort tried to physically move out of the way, but was too late. He was hit, and fell unconscious. Three Aurors shouted "Avada Kedavra!" and fired Killing Curses at Voldemort, but he disappeared less than a second before the Curses would have hit. Two of the three Aurors swore in frustration, which Harry could easily understand.

They were still outnumbered, but Harry was sure that they would prevail now that Voldemort was gone, and he was right. Harry started shooting off Stunning spells, stopping only to protect Kingsley at one point with the Killing Curse shield. He took down seven Death Eaters in a row with one Stunning spell each; five were unconscious, and two were knocked flat and dazed. As he did so, the Aurors were able to gang up on their weaker opponents. In less than a half a

minute, the last Death Eater was on the ground, wrapped in ropes.

Kingsley approached him. "Thanks, Harry, Neville. That was... helpful," he said, with humorous understatement.

For the first time since the magic went out at Hogwarts, Harry smiled. "Any time." Turning to Neville, he asked, "How did you get here, anyway?"

Speaking to Kingsley and Dawlish as well as Harry, Neville answered, "While you were dealing with the wounded attackers, Hermione realized that the rest of us would be able to Apparate as well. Since all of Hogwarts' magic is down, that includes the anti-Disapparation magic. For now, Apparating at Hogwarts is no different than Apparating anywhere, so all six of us can do it."

"Oh, that's right, I have to get back—"

Neville shook his head. "I told Hermione I was coming here to talk to Kingsley; she said she and the others would help you move the wounded. I'm sure they're done by now. Anyway, I was near the room here when the battle started; I tried to Disapparate to get you when I saw Voldemort—he didn't see me, I think, or else he might have known you'd be coming—but he'd put down a field, and I couldn't, so I ran away from the battle area, called Fawkes, and asked him to take me to you." Turning to Kingsley, he added, "I felt bad, I didn't want you to think I was running away or something. I just didn't want Voldemort to see Fawkes being called."

"You did the right thing, Neville," Kingsley assured him, a hand on Neville's shoulder. "And helped save our lives, I should add. Harry, I trust you'll thank Dumbledore for us tonight. Also, would you do me a favor, and ask McGonagall

to come here with you? There are a few things I'd like to talk to the both of you about."

Harry nodded, and he and Neville both Disapparated. Back at Hogwarts, he and Neville found that the others had in fact finished moving the wounded attackers.

Harry relayed Kingsley's request to McGonagall; she hesitated. "I do not feel comfortable leaving. Though I can do nothing magical, I am in charge, and I should oversee the aftermath of this. Perhaps..." She touched her pendant, then let it go in frustration. "It is very annoying not to be able to call someone. Harry, would you ask Fawkes to bring Professor Snape?"

Harry did, and Snape was there in a few seconds. "Thank you, Professor Snape, and you, Fawkes," said McGonagall. "Professor Snape, Kingsley wishes my presence at the Aurors' facility along with that of Professor Potter, but I do not wish to leave, so I am sending you instead. Miss Weasley, I want you with me at all times until further notice. Harry, I expect you to keep her informed of what is happening, and she will tell me. Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom, come with me as well; I will be assigning you to accompany Professors Flitwick and Sprout, doing what magic they feel needs to be done around Hogwarts. Mr. Weasley and Miss Parkinson, I want you two to patrol around Hogsmeade, being very careful to keep your Repulsion Charms going at all times. You may offer magical assistance to the residents who request it as you choose, but your main responsibility is to make sure Hogsmeade is secure, and that there are not roving bands of armed Muggles threatening the residents. Does anyone have any questions?"

"Yes," said Pansy. "How long should we patrol?"

"Report back to me every hour until I tell you otherwise," responded McGonagall. Nodding, Ron and Pansy headed out the gate into Hogsmeade. McGonagall headed back to the castle, followed by Ginny, Hermione, and Neville.

Harry gestured to Snape. "Ready?"

Snape looked very unhappy. "It has been a very long time since I had to be escorted anywhere."

Harry chuckled lightly. "I suppose I can understand why you'd be annoyed." He stood behind Snape, put his hands on Snape's shoulders, and they were in the room in which the battle had been fought.

"Professor McGonagall doesn't want to leave, but I'll be keeping her informed through Ginny, on my hand," he informed Kingsley. "By the way, shouldn't we be trying to figure out how this was done?"

Kingsley nodded, as Dawlish joined them. "Actually, Harry, those of us who haven't been kept busy moving people to hospitals, rescuing Aurors, and fighting off armed Muggles have had a bit of time to think about that. But first, Professor Snape, I'd like to hear your thoughts."

"Either Iutas, or the Four Corners artifact," Snape said simply.

"We thought of Iutas," agreed Kingsley. "But the Four Corners... does that really even exist?" To Harry's confused look, Kingsley added, "It's supposed to be a legendary magical artifact, that when set up exactly the right way, can cause disruption of magic over a great area. But it hasn't been verifiably seen for over a thousand years."

"I have no more information about it than you do," responded Snape. "But it is my understanding that the Dark Lord has spent much time, both himself and his assistants, scouring the Earth for rare magical artifacts, in an effort to..." He glanced over at Harry, then finished, "... remove a particular thorn in his side."

"I'm flattered," said Harry wryly. "But what's lutas?"

"Don't you... oh, you stopped taking Herbology," recalled Kingsley. "You study it in N.E.W.T. Herbology. It's a rare herb, which has two magic-related properties. One is that it's invisible, which is why Muggles don't know about it. Two, it can't be pulled out of the ground, or cut. Three... okay, three properties. Three, in sufficient concentration, it disallows the use of magic in a rather large area. That's the one that makes the most sense to me, but it's going to be hard to find out if it's right."

"I think," said Harry, "it's time to have a little chat with Malfoy, and after him, then Nott."

"We don't have Nott anymore, Harry," said Kingsley, looking upset. "He wasn't one of the ones we were holding. While you were fighting off the Muggles, other Death Eaters were attacking the areas where other prisoners were being held. Thirteen escaped, Nott among them. So, even though you helped us catch fifteen new ones tonight, it comes out as a wash."

"Is it really that hard to hold onto these people?" wondered Harry, frustrated.

Dawlish nodded sympathetically. "We like it even less that you do, believe me. But look what happened just now. If you hadn't come and saved our asses, we'd be dead, and these

ten gone. So it's hard to blame the ones guarding the others too much."

"Was anyone killed when the others escaped?" asked Harry.

"No, thank goodness," replied Kingsley. "Anyway, back to this topic, we've checked Malfoy already, a Legilimens has gone over him. We already know all we can from him. There's a Memory Charm, of course, there always is with Death Eaters we capture. We can't get past it."

"I could," said Harry simply. Snape, Dawlish, and Kingsley stared at him in varying degrees of surprise.

"Um, Harry... are you saying you're going to torture him?" asked Kingsley incredulously. "Somehow, I don't think you could."

"I don't have to torture him. I can do the Imperius Curse on him," said Harry with determination. "I can make him help me get rid of it."

"Professor, you have never done the Imperius Curse," pointed out Snape. "In addition, I do not think its use is consistent with what you refer to as the energy of love. It is a very Dark spell."

Harry smiled grimly. "Not the way I'm going to do it. Take me to him." The other three looked at each other for a few seconds in silence. Getting annoyed, Harry said, "Look, I'm serious. If it is this lutas thing, he probably knows about it, maybe even had something to do with it, and we have to know. Every minute Hogwarts is without magic, it's very vulnerable. There's over three hundred people there, including a lot of my friends. We've got to find out, and I can do it. I know how to break a Memory Charm with the other

person's cooperation, and I can make him cooperate. Let me do it."

The others exchanged glances, and Kingsley gave a light shrug. "I suppose it can't hurt to try. All right, let's go." He walked off, the others following.

As they walked, Snape said, "It will be better if I observe from a spot out of Malfoy's line of sight."

Harry suddenly remembered why Snape was there, and that McGonagall wanted to be kept informed. He held up his hand, speaking as they walked. "Kingsley is taking me to where they're keeping Malfoy. Voldemort gave him a Memory Charm, and I'm going to use the Imperius Curse to make him help me break it." He listened for the response, then chuckled, and said, "Just tell her." He put down his hand and said to the others, "She said, 'you're going to do *what?*'"

"I don't blame her," said Kingsley.

Harry listened again, and said to the others, "McGonagall said, 'Well, just so long as he doesn't do anything rash.'"

"Okay, here we are, next one down," advised Kingsley. Snape stopped walking. Malfoy was being kept in what looked roughly like a prison cell, except that the bars were thin, and made of what looked to Harry like silver. Harry walked up to the door; Malfoy, having heard the noise, turned to see what it was. His eyebrows went high upon seeing Harry.

Harry wasn't sure exactly why he was so sure he could do what he intended, but he was, which he felt was more than half the battle. He felt he probably couldn't do it if he hadn't had the spell done to him before, and if he weren't a Legilimens. Already pointing his wand at Malfoy, he concentrated on Malfoy's mind, on infusing it with feelings

of love. He sent out the energy... and Malfoy suddenly screamed, as if in horrible pain, and toppled to the ground. "Damn!" exclaimed Harry, as Kingsley and Dawlish gaped at him. He Stunned Malfoy, then walked back to where Snape stood, Kingsley and Dawlish following.

Kingsley looked at Harry with amazement and concern. "Harry, what in the hell did you do?"

"I focused on causing him to feel intense feelings of love," Harry explained. As he said it, he realized that he should have predicted what happened. Malfoy had been Cleansed, and so was unable to feel love; when forced to, he experienced it as pain, as he had during the Cleansing.

"And he screamed in pain?" asked a disbelieving Kingsley. "No offense, but I don't think you did it right."

"I did it right," Harry insisted, though he knew he wasn't going to be able to explain what had happened without explaining the Cleansing.

Kingsley tried again. "Harry, if you try to cause someone to feel love—"

"He did it properly," interrupted Snape. "The Dark Lord modifies the minds of Death Eaters in such a way that they cannot feel the emotion of love; they would feel very intense pain if forced to try." Harry found himself surprised that Snape had given even that detail of the Cleansing. He must think this is important, thought Harry.

Kingsley and Dawlish exchanged amazed looks. Kingsley looked at Snape and asked, "Why did I not know about this?"

Snape returned Kingsley's stare. "It has never been relevant until now."

Kingsley was silent for a few seconds, then looked at Harry. "Harry, I want you to do to me what you did to him."

"Sure," agreed Harry. He pointed his wand at Kingsley and focused on infusing him with love; he could sense Kingsley embrace the feeling. He sent a silent impression of what he wanted, and Kingsley dutifully hopped in place twice, then waved at the ceiling. Harry withdrew the spell.

Recovering, Kingsley gaped at him. "*That's* what you did to him? Harry, that felt wonderful, blissful. People would *pay* you to do that to them. I've had the Imperius Curse done to me, and I'm good at resisting it. That may have the same effect as the Imperius Curse, but it is most certainly not the Imperius Curse. I went into it with the idea of resisting it, but as soon as I felt it, I felt like, why in the world would I resist this?" He shook his head in amazement. "And that caused Malfoy intense pain..."

"Remember," pointed out Dawlish, "Professor Snape did say it was a Dark spell, and he said, 'not the way I'm going to do it.'" He looked at Harry as if trying hard to understand something. "How in the world do you just make up a spell like that?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I just want this really badly, I want to find out what he knows, and I knew it would work... on most people, that is."

Snape looked at Harry significantly. "It still may work on him, Professor, but in a way you did not expect."

Harry nodded. "I had the same thought. But we need to know more."

"Indeed," agreed Snape, who turned to Kingsley. "Mr. Shacklebolt, please give me a five-digit number, and after I

have memorized it, erase it from my memory."

Kingsley's eyes went wide as he realized why Snape was asking. "You can't be serious..." Turning to Harry, he asked, "And you're going to do this?"

Harry took a deep breath. "I'm not thrilled about it, and if it was just for the information I think Malfoy has, I wouldn't do it, even with Professor Snape's permission. But this could go far beyond Malfoy, and his information. It could be very, very, very important."

Kingsley calmed down as he understood what Harry was saying. "You mean, it could be a weapon against Voldemort."

"A very powerful weapon," confirmed Snape. "Please do as I requested."

Kingsley nodded. "Five four six seven two. Do you have it?"

"Five four six seven two," repeated Snape. "Now, please give me a second number, but do not allow Professor Potter to hear it." Harry took a few steps away as Kingsley whispered to Snape, then he walked back.

Kingsley waved his wand at Snape. "Do you know the numbers?"

Snape thought. "No, I do not, though I recall everything else, such as that I requested you to do this, and why. We may be back; we will find you if we need to see Malfoy again." He looked at Harry expectantly.

"Your office?" asked Harry.

Snape shook his head. "We must inform the headmistress first. Please ask Miss Weasley where she is." Harry did, and

reported that she was in the Great Hall. "Ask her to meet us in the Transfiguration classroom, as it is nearby." Again, Harry did, then put his hands on Snape's shoulders.

They were in the Transfiguration classroom; McGonagall and Ginny walked in a few seconds later. McGonagall turned to Ginny and said, "Miss Weasley, you may go—"

"Miss Weasley should remain," interrupted Snape, drawing him a reflexive sharp look from McGonagall, who Harry knew very well hated to be interrupted. "If she is to be a conduit of communication, it is better that she know what is happening."

"Very well," McGonagall agreed. Harry and Snape related the story, earning frequent surprised looks from both McGonagall and Ginny. After they finished, McGonagall said, "Harry, like Kingsley, I feel that I must know what this feels like. Please do it to me."

Harry did, causing her to clap her hands five times; afterwards, she had much the same reaction as Kingsley. "Remarkable. Absolutely remarkable. You are having quite a night, Harry. Two new spells."

"Two?"

"The area-effect fire-suppression spell," she clarified. "Such a version of that spell did not exist."

"Ah. Well, probably better that I didn't know, I might not have tried. No, I take that back. I would have, I was pretty desperate. And, I'm pretty desperate to find out what's causing this, and I just have a feeling it's underneath that Memory Charm on Malfoy. I think I can get it."

Ginny stepped forward, concerned. "Harry, I understand why you're desperate, but you should think about this. Is it consistent with the energy of love to do something that'll cause intense pain?"

Before Harry could respond, Snape did. "It is a supreme irony, Miss Weasley, that it is the energy of love itself that causes intense pain, in this instance. It must therefore be consistent with it."

"I think he's right," said Harry, looking at Ginny with appreciation for her concern. "I know what you mean... but I don't think it's immoral. I'm not sure I can tell you why I think that, but I do, and it's not just because I want what Malfoy has. Besides, remember what happened to Albus after he killed Grindelwald. If this wasn't consistent with the energy of love, I wouldn't be able to do it."

"I know," she sighed, then stepped forward quickly and kissed him on the cheek. Looking into his eyes intently, she said, "Just never forget who you are."

"I won't, I promise," he replied earnestly. He turned to Snape. "Your office?"

Snape nodded, and they left.

They walked to Snape's office in silence. Inside, Snape closed the door and asked Harry to soundproof it. "The soundproofing notwithstanding, you should Silence me before you proceed."

Despite his determination, the idea made him a bit queasy; he slowly nodded.

Snape seemed to notice his expression. "It is important, Professor, that you not allow your concern for my condition

to affect what you do."

"How can I not?" asked Harry.

"Having a feeling, and letting it affect what you do, are two different things," said Snape. "You will suffer for what you do; if you did not, it would be to your mind immoral, and Miss Weasley's concern would be justified." He paused, watching Harry mull this over. Then he said, "Do you recall, Professor, that on the night of the Dark Lord's return, the headmaster asked me to undertake a task, a thing he was highly reluctant to ask of me?"

Harry nodded. "I remember. He was really concerned."

"I would like you to view that memory; it may be of assistance." Solemnly, wondering what he would find, Harry cast Legilimens.

Snape Apparated in the graveyard, fifteen feet from Voldemort. "My Lord," he said. "I humbly apologize for my inability to appear promptly. I was at Hogwarts, and Dumbledore would have found my immediate disappearance suspicious—"

"You dare to show yourself in my presence?" hissed Voldemort. "Do you wish so badly to die? I will oblige you, of course."

The other Death Eaters were watching, though their heads were down. "I wish only to serve you, my Lord. I may be highly useful; I have Dumbledore's confidence—"

"And why should you not have his confidence, having been his spy?" asked Voldemort disbelievingly.

"I was not, and have never been his spy, my Lord. My memories are open to you; you will see that this is the truth."

"The ones who told me very much believed that it was true," said Voldemort coldly.

"They were mistaken, my Lord," maintained Snape calmly.

Voldemort regarded Snape with great suspicion, his expression one of 'do you really think I am so foolish as to be tricked in this way?' He stared at Snape for a half a minute, then asked, "And what have you been doing these thirteen years, Snape, that you feel gives you the right to be in my presence now?"

"Looking forward to the day of your return, my Lord, I insinuated myself with Dumbledore, telling him that I had seen the error of my ways and wished to be a better person. Dumbledore is quite foolish in this respect, as you know, his great magical power notwithstanding. Such a flimsy story would seem highly suspect, but it is exactly the sort of thing that motivates his sympathy. He now trusts me, which has been my aim for these thirteen years, so that I may serve you better."

Voldemort paused, thinking. "I detect no lie, but then of course, I know very well that you are an excellent Occlumens, almost my equal. I suspect that you would be capable of lying to me undetected." Snape said nothing, as Voldemort paused again. "Tell me, Snape, why should I believe you? What would you do if you were me?"

"I would attempt to confirm what I was told, my Lord."

Voldemort smiled cruelly. "But I have no way to confirm it, Snape, do I? I have only your word."

Snape levelly replied, "You need not simply accept my word, my Lord. I may be an excellent Occlumens, but there is a test that I cannot pass unless my words are true, and that we both know I must pass in order to hope to earn your trust."

Voldemort's smile became even more cruel. "And you look forward to this, do you?"

"I confess that I do not look forward to the test itself, my Lord," Snape admitted. "But I look forward to proving myself to you."

Voldemort laughed. "You are honest about that, at least. And how long should the test be for?"

"For the maximum possible time, my Lord."

Voldemort continued to smile, apparently enjoying himself. "And you are sure you do not look forward to the experience itself?"

"I am sure, my Lord."

Voldemort chuckled mirthlessly. "You are brave, Snape, I will acknowledge that. Very well, I will do as you suggest. Lucius, step forward." Malfoy did so. "Five minutes each time, three times, with pauses of thirty seconds. Understood?"

"Understood, my Lord," repeated Malfoy, taking off his watch.

"Very well, Snape. We will proceed. Malfoy, now!"

"Crucio!" shouted Malfoy, and Snape collapsed to the ground, screaming in agony, writhing uncontrollably.

Voldemort regarded the screaming Snape with amusement for ten seconds, then lazily took out his wand. "Legilimens," he said. He entered Snape's mind, and began searching.

The image faded, and the memory disappeared; Harry withdrew from Snape's mind. "I will not subject you to the entire memory," said Snape. "It is not necessary; you get the sense of it."

Harry felt that he didn't know what to say. "Was that your way of telling me that whatever happens here, it's not as bad as other things?"

"In part," confirmed Snape. "I could have shown you my memories of being Cleansed, but that would have been somewhat different, as I did not truly understand the nature of what was to be done. In this case, I did, but volunteered, so that I could oppose the Dark Lord."

"So... the idea of the test was that even though you're an excellent Occlumens, nobody could be tortured so intensely for fifteen minutes and still manage to hide a memory from a Legilimens," speculated Harry.

"Correct."

"So, the obvious question is... how did you manage it?"

"I have already told you of my ability to compartmentalize memories," explained Snape. "Before the event itself, of course, I could not know for certain that it would work under such mental and physical duress. It was crucial that I not fail." Snape gazed at Harry solemnly. "So... I practiced."

Harry gasped, and felt tears press against him instantly. "Albus..."

"Yes and no," Snape replied. "No wizard can perform two spells concurrently, and the headmaster had to be occupied by searching me with Legilimens. It fell to Professor McGonagall to perform the actual Curse."

Taking off his glasses, Harry buried his head in his hands. Despite his efforts, a few tears escaped, and he wiped his eyes before putting his glasses back on. "That's why she wasn't concerned, like Ginny was, about my morality. She knows what it is to be in my position, and then some."

"Exactly," agreed Snape. "I know they both suffered greatly. So, as I said, it is important that you not allow what I experience to affect what you do, as they did not in that situation. You must do what is necessary to find the information we need."

"I understand," said Harry gravely. "Are you ready?"

"I am," said Snape. He really is brave, thought Harry.

Harry pointed his wand at Snape and Silenced him, then focused hard on love, on infusing Snape with feelings of love. Snape screamed silently, writhing in pain. Trying very hard to focus, not to let what was happening to Snape interfere with what he was doing, he continued sending out love. Still in his chair, Snape continued to scream. Finally, Snape lost consciousness; Harry estimated that it had been about ten seconds.

Harry searched Snape's mind, looking for a Memory Charm. It took him about a minute to find it; he wondered if he would get faster with more experience, as he had never gone looking for a Memory Charm before. He focused on unlocking it, as he had his own Memory Charm as Hermione had guided him to the spot. Very soon he could feel the Charm slipping away, and he saw Kingsley tell Snape the

first number, then whisper the second. Harry sat back in his chair, mentally exhausted, glad to have accomplished what he wanted.

As Harry started to wonder how soon Snape would regain consciousness, he had a startling revelation, and felt stupid for not having realized it sooner: what he had just done to Snape was similar to what Dumbledore did to Voldemort. Oh, my God, thought Harry, I can do to Voldemort what Albus does.

Snape started stirring four minutes later. Harry fought back an urge to walk over to his chair and prop him up, or provide some other unnecessary assistance; he wondered if this was what Molly felt like when she tried to straighten his clothes or fix his hair.

"Professor... are you all right?"

"It appears so," said Snape, as though Harry had asked an interesting question. "The pain notwithstanding, it was a... fascinating experience. The quality of the pain was far different than the Cruciatus Curse; it was not even exactly pain, so much as... unbearable stimulation. I cannot quite put it into words."

"I guess it's probably because what I do isn't intended to be painful," suggested Harry.

"No doubt," agreed Snape, looking at a clock. "I see that I was unconscious for less than five minutes. Have you informed Miss Weasley and the headmistress?"

"No, I wanted to wait until you came back, talk to you first," said Harry.

"Understandable. Apparently you retrieved the memory, since I can now recall both numbers."

Harry nodded. "Yes, once you were unconscious, it didn't take long at all. But I wondered about that, I thought I needed you to help me. It can't just be that you can break a Memory Charm by making someone unconscious, or Voldemort could do it that way. How did it happen?"

Snape thought for a few seconds before answering. "Since this is a completely new spell, we cannot know. I would speculate, however, that the reason is that you created the spell with the intention of breaking Memory Charms; since that was your intent, the spell allows you to do so, even if it does not happen in the way you thought it would. It has the same effect as the Imperius Curse, but it appears to have... additional functionality."

Harry raised his eyebrows; he wasn't quite used to the idea that he could simply create spells. "Strange. During vacation, just to see what would happen, I tried to create some new spells, but I couldn't do it. But with this, when I had the idea, I just knew that I could do it. I have no idea why. I really wish I knew how this worked, but I guess I should just be glad it does. Now, I can get into Malfoy's mind."

"And I assume you grasp the larger implications?" prompted Snape.

"Yes, I can do this to Voldemort. It's funny, it doesn't really change anything right now, since Albus could do it before. It's partly that he doesn't have to now, unless I'm unconscious or something... but I have a feeling that this is part of the puzzle, that there's more to this than we can see right now."

"Indeed. I would say this was quite worthwhile. We should meet with the headmistress, then with Mr. Shacklebolt. Where is she?"

Harry looked into his hand and spoke to Ginny, then repeated her answer to Snape. "The kitchens. Oh, that's right, we never had the feast. I should be hungry, but I'm not." They headed to the kitchens.

Ten minutes later, Harry, Snape, and Kingsley were walking to the area where the Death Eaters were being held. "After I do it," asked Harry, "should I give him a Memory Charm?"

"We don't plan on letting him escape, but it's probably not a bad idea," agreed Kingsley. "If he did, Voldemort would be pretty ticked off when he found a Memory Charm he couldn't get through. He'd torture Malfoy long and hard trying, though." He paused, then added, "No less than the bastard deserves."

Harry couldn't disagree, but couldn't contemplate the idea that it was a good thing. "Okay, I'll give him one when I'm done, it'll cover everything that happened tonight. Probably to him right now, one day's a lot like another."

"We don't provide them with a great deal of entertainment," commented Kingsley wryly.

When they reached Malfoy's holding area, Snape again hung back. Having prepared himself, Harry stepped forward, looking at Malfoy. Malfoy started to speak, but Harry Silenced him, then cast the new spell. Malfoy collapsed, screaming noiselessly. While not concerned about Malfoy as he had been about Snape, Harry nonetheless had to try hard to keep his focus on love, on what he was doing. He kept it going, not noticing Kingsley watching. As had been the case

with Snape, Malfoy lost consciousness after about ten seconds.

Casting Legilimens, Harry started searching for the Memory Charm, and soon found it. Again focusing on love, it took less than a minute to dissolve the Charm. Viewing the memory, Harry made a fist of triumph. He exited Malfoy's mind soon thereafter, applying a new Memory Charm. He walked away, followed by Snape and Kingsley, and they were soon in the large room where the recent battle had been fought.

"It's the plant, the lutas," said Harry. "This is something Voldemort had him do at the beginning of last year, as soon as the term started. He was given these seeds, and told to walk around the perimeter of the school, just dropping them anywhere there was dirt. Apparently they're like weeds, they can grow pretty much anywhere."

"They are not, actually," Snape corrected him. "But they can be imbued to do so. I suspect the Dark Lord did not tell him the purpose of what he was doing."

"No, he didn't," agreed Harry. "All Malfoy knew was that it was very important. Well, looks like it's back to Hogwarts, to meet with McGonagall and Sprout." He looked into his hand and talked to Ginny, then put it down after a short conversation. "They don't know where Sprout is; they assume she's in the Hufflepuff area. McGonagall told me to come back and send for her with my dog." He looked at Kingsley. "Thanks for all your help, Kingsley."

"Wasn't much, I just took you to where we're holding him. Keep me informed, all right? I'll be in the standby room most of the time, so go there. If I'm not there, have someone call

me." Harry nodded, then put his hands on Snape's shoulders.

Five minutes later, he, Snape, McGonagall, Sprout, and Ginny were sitting in McGonagall's quarters. Harry finished the story, and Sprout whistled in amazement. "I'd love to know how he got ahold of so many seeds. They're very rare, very hard to get. I try occasionally, thinking it would be an interesting N.E.W.T. in-class activity, but I can't get even a handful of them."

"It's remarkable what you can accomplish, Pomona, with great magical power and a total absence of morality," remarked McGonagall dryly. "So, what can we do?"

"There's only one thing," said Sprout simply. "Phoenixes." To Harry's surprised expression, she explained, "I'm sure you know from reading *Reborn From the Ashes* that phoenixes eat only herbs, a few specific ones. This is one of them, their favorite one. They love it. Lutas can't be pulled or cut; the only way they can be gotten rid of is to be eaten by a phoenix. The phoenix can eat all the way down to the root, eat the complete plant if they want to. Usually they don't, though; they want the plant to live, so they just eat down to a certain point, then let it grow again before eating from it." Sprout suddenly had a regretful look. "Too bad humans don't manage to do that with the things that are important to us."

"Lucky that there's a phoenix around here," said Harry. "Well, I'll ask Fawkes to do it, see what he thinks."

Sprout chuckled. "It's going to take much more than Fawkes, Harry. If the quantity is anything like what it would take to shut down magic over this kind of area, it's going to take a lot of phoenixes, as many as we can get. You need to let Fawkes know that this is important; he needs to tell other

phoenixes, spread the word throughout the phoenix community, so to speak. The good news is that others probably won't be reluctant to come. This'll be like a feast for them."

"It's nice that someone gets to have a feast," remarked McGonagall.

"Professor, I know that a lot of phoenixes aren't bonded to humans," said Harry. "The ones that aren't, are they people-shy?"

Sprout shrugged. "Now you're getting out of my area of expertise, and into Hagrid's. You'll have to ask him."

"You might simply ask Fawkes," suggested McGonagall.

"Good point," agreed Harry. Fawkes suddenly appeared, and perched on Harry's shoulder. Sprout and McGonagall talked, but Harry didn't hear it, as he was focused on Fawkes, communicating with him. After a minute, Harry chuckled, and the others looked at him quizzically.

"You know that Fawkes communicates with images and impressions, not words," explained Harry. "When I let him know what we needed, he sent me an image of the Hogwarts grounds, with phoenixes all over the place. Obviously he thinks it'll be no problem getting them to come. He knows that we want them to eat them completely, and the impression I got from him was equivalent to the words, 'what a shame, such a waste.'"

Sprout smiled. "Yes, he would think that. Well, I may have you ask him and the others to leave several plants intact, if there are any near the greenhouse, which there probably are; I'd bet Malfoy saw that as a good place to leave some."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Harry suddenly. "Yesterday I was talking to Hagrid in his hut, and he admitted... well, he might not want me telling you this, so don't repeat it, but he uses magic occasionally--"

He broke off as McGonagall and Sprout started chuckling. "That's not exactly the world's best-kept secret, Harry," said Sprout. "But do continue, sorry."

"Right. Anyway, he couldn't do magic yesterday, he asked me to get a fire going for him. He thought it was just something wrong with him, and it probably confirmed his impression that I was able to do it."

"No doubt," agreed McGonagall. "Irony, that we almost had warning of this, but missed it, for the same reason that we were saved later. You do understand, Harry, that if not for the energy of love, we would all be dead. Many would have been killed in the fire, and those not killed would have been helpless against the mercenaries. I suppose we cannot know or guess why this particular type of magic is immune to the plant's effect."

"There are quite a few mysteries about it," agreed Harry. "One of the reasons I've been hesitating to teach it."

McGonagall smiled sympathetically. "I believe you will now have no choice but to at least try. Between its normal utility, its staggering usefulness in this situation, and the Sorting Hat's song, your students will simply not allow you to avoid it."

Harry shook his head. "Funny, the Sorting Hat telling me what to teach, pretty much telling the students to make me teach it. It must have known I was reluctant, and decided to give me a shove. I suppose you're right, I'm going to have to

do something. Anyway, about Hagrid, why did it happen to him first?"

"The area around his hut is also a logical place for Malfoy to have dropped a larger-than-normal amount of seeds," explained Sprout. "The plants have a collective effect, not an individual one; they don't inhibit magic until there are enough mature ones to reach a critical mass. There must have been enough near Hagrid's hut to do that."

"Which reminds me," put in McGonagall, "the timing of this was quite suspicious. It could have happened during the summer, or during the daytime, or when the Hall was empty, but it happened at just the right time to cause maximum damage. Could they have controlled the timing in such a way?"

Sprout thought for a moment. "The only thing I can think of would be that they might have set fire to a few of them. There may have been a local critical mass near the edge of the grounds, as there was near Hagrid's hut. If so, Hogwarts' normal defenses against aerial penetration would have been ineffective over that area, and a Death Eater could have flown in and set a few plants on fire. That would have caused a sudden increase in the intensity of the effect, and set off a critical mass involving all the plants at Hogwarts."

Snape spoke. "How long will it take for the phoenixes to consume enough of the plants that the effect will be lifted?"

"I have no idea," admitted Sprout. "Again, more of a question for Hagrid. Does Fawkes have any idea?"

Fawkes was still perched on Harry's shoulder. Harry waited a few seconds for any impressions, then responded, "Fawkes isn't really much for communicating numbers. Like, if he wants to get across the idea of 'two days,' he'll show me the

sun rising and setting twice. He couldn't be sure even if he could tell me exact times, but my impression is that he doesn't think it'll be a long time. Definitely less than a month, he thinks."

"How does he communicate the idea of a month?" asked Ginny, who then added, "Oh, by the phases of the moon, of course."

"Right," confirmed Harry.

"Well, I am glad that it will be no longer than that," said McGonagall. "Now that we know what is involved, we must consider the question of Hogwarts' security until then, not to mention that of Hogsmeade, which is also vulnerable. As competent as you and your friends have shown yourselves to be, Harry, the burden is too great for even the six of you. Not to mention that as the only ones who can do magic, your services will also be needed around the castle. It appears that I must leave Hogwarts after all; I must confer with Kingsley about this matter. Professor Snape, you will be in charge until my return. Most everyone knows what they should be doing; you will need only handle new problems as they arise. Continue sending Mr. Weasley and Miss Parkinson into Hogsmeade every hour until further notice. Miss Weasley, unless Professor Snape needs you for some specific purpose, please patrol the Hogwarts grounds, with particular attention to the lake and the gate, in case something gets by your brother and Miss Parkinson. If you see anything unusual, call Harry on your hand immediately."

Ginny nodded, as did Snape, who asked, "How is the food situation being handled?"

Sprout answered. "The house-elves are beside themselves, poor things. They rely so strongly on magic, they feel like we

would if our arms and legs stopped working. The food was already prepared; it was just a bit cold, but we got it to the students. But we still don't know what we're going to do about tomorrow; the elves don't have a clue how to cook without magic. We're thinking of getting the food imported from other places, like the Ministry, for example; we just have to work out the transportation."

"Well, I will discuss that with the Aurors as well," said McGonagall. "Harry, you will join us in the meeting, of course, as Hogwarts' security rests with you and your friends for the moment. Pomona, if there is any information on Lutas that you do not have, or anyone it would be useful to talk to, feel free to leave Hogwarts; Mr. Longbottom can escort you. Harry, we should get going." The others left McGonagall's quarters as Harry put his hands on her shoulders.

Two hours later, Harry Apparated out to the Hogwarts grounds, and saw two figures standing by the lake. He Apparated to them, and was standing a few feet from Ginny and Justin. "Harry!" Ginny exclaimed, and threw herself at him, hugging then kissing him. "Does this mean you're free?"

"For the moment, anyway," he said, as she let him go and he exchanged greetings with Justin. They started walking, in no particular direction.

"I'm really glad," she said, her eyes emphasizing her words. "Justin was nice enough to come out and keep me company. I ran into him and Ernie the last time I went in to use the bathrooms. Thank goodness they don't need to use magic."

Harry chuckled at the thought. "I assume Ernie was busy doing Head Boy stuff?"

Justin laughed. "More like, looking for Head Boy stuff to do. He envies the hell out of you six; he'd like nothing more than to still be able to do magic, to be useful..." He grinned broadly, then continued, "... to be turning tanks upside down..."

Harry shrugged. "Like I've said, you do what you have to do."

"No, Harry," corrected Justin. "You do what you have to do; the rest of us do what we can do. There's a real difference. Anyway, he's found a few things, but nothing that important. He spent some time talking to the first years, being all 'I'm Head Boy,' and like that. He was telling them about Hogwarts, but of course by that time the story of what you guys did was all over, so all they did was ask questions about you, when their first class with you was, why you could use magic when no one else could, that sort of thing. I was near the wall watching, and it was all I could do not to laugh. He wrapped it up pretty quickly, and left." He shook his head and added, "Usually, the Head Boy is the most important seventh year student, but not this year. You might want to be tolerant of him, Harry, if he seems weird around you for a while. I mean, he likes you, of course, but this is kind of hard for him. He'll be okay once things around here get back to normal."

"I hope so," said Harry. To Ginny, he asked, "Have you seen Ron and Pansy lately?"

"Yeah, we saw them at their last check-in, talked to them for a few minutes. Apparently they're becoming popular in Hogsmeade, people asking their help with all kinds of stuff, like starting fires, using their wands as flashlights to help them find their lanterns. One woman apparently tried to get them to rearrange her furniture."

Harry laughed. "Better them than me. Of course, they probably don't envy me, either, spending the last two hours in meetings."

"I just realized, you haven't eaten, have you? You've been too busy."

"No, I ate during the first meeting. Kingsley had their house-elves bring me and McGonagall about two meals' worth of food each. So, I'm set for the night."

"Good," said Ginny. "So, about security, what are they going to do?"

"First, it was just Kingsley, McGonagall and me at the Aurors' facility," explained Harry, "then we went to the Ministry, and met with Bright for almost an hour. Then Bright started making arrangements, and people were coming in and out of the room. They're calling people into the Ministry, it's pretty busy there right now."

"Anyway, what it looks like they're going to do is call in the Muggle military," he said. To their raised eyebrows, he added, "Yeah, that was my reaction too, but they don't have a lot of choice. It's either that or the six of us, and it would be hard for us to provide twenty-four-hour security. We could do it, but it would be tiring, like the Apparation crisis shifts. It's not going to be a whole army or something, though they haven't decided the exact number. They're making an emergency request right now; Bright and Kingsley are meeting with the Muggle Prime Minister... oh, what's his name again?"

"Kenneth Barclay. Don't read the Muggle papers much, do you?" asked Justin humorously.

"I can barely get myself to read the Prophet," responded Harry in the same vein. "They're going to ask him to send a small number, like fifty or a hundred, no more than that. It would be too disruptive, and they don't need much more anyway, since they'll still have us six. They'll still call us if there's another attack, and we could probably handle it by ourselves if we had to. The Muggles will be kind of an early-warning system, just so we can be safer until the phoenixes eat enough of the lutas that we get magic back. I assume she told you about that."

"Yeah, but I asked her how you found out, and she wouldn't tell me." Justin's tone made clear that he was teasing Ginny.

"Sorry, but I'm involved in some stuff that can't be public. I would tell you, I know you can be trusted, but..."

"'Tell no one, even people you trust,' I recall you saying last year," said Justin. "It's all right, I understand."

"How did the first years seem, Justin?" asked Ginny.

"Pretty nervous, which I could really understand," said Justin sympathetically. "I mean, their first day at Hogwarts, and there's a big fire in the Great Hall as they're getting Sorted, and most people lose the ability to do magic? Thank goodness you got to them fast, Harry, and none of them had to go to St. Mungo's."

"I happened to be near them, and figured they wouldn't know the fire-suppression spell," said Harry. "I didn't know at that point that the magic was out."

"Funny, when you say it like that, it sounds like something that the Muggle repairman comes to your home to take care of," said Justin. "'Right, Mrs. Johnson, we've got your magic back on. That'll be twenty quid, please.'"

Harry laughed heartily at the thought. "I wish it were that simple."

"That would be nice," agreed Justin. "Anyway, back to the first years, at one point I passed the Hall and saw all of the Slytherin second years, talking to the first years. So I think they'll be pretty well briefed on the Harry Potter situation."

"Oh, good," said Harry sarcastically, as Justin and Ginny chuckled.

As they walked, they turned toward the Quidditch pitch. "Hey, look," said Harry, pointing.

Not far from the pitch, Harry saw over twenty phoenixes on the ground, and two in the air. "Oh, wow," said Ginny admiringly.

"Hannah is going to go nuts," said Justin. "How many do you think are going to be here?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "More than this, though. I got the impression from Fawkes that it could be as many as a hundred. I just got an image, though, not a number."

"He must still be spreading the word," said Ginny. "'Come to Hogwarts! All you can eat!'"

"That's about it," agreed Harry.

"Do you think it's okay if we get closer?" wondered Justin.

"I think so, as long as we're slow," answered Harry. They walked slowly, getting to within ten feet of the nearest one, then stopped.

"They really are beautiful," said Justin softly.

"They sure are," agreed Ginny. They stood and watched the phoenixes for several minutes, then turned and headed back. "I just realized, I'm supposed to be patrolling," said Ginny, abashed. "I was watching them so closely, the castle could have been invaded and I wouldn't have noticed."

"I think we'd have heard something." Harry put his arm around her reassuringly.

She leaned into him, then leaned over and kissed him. As an afterthought, she said to Justin, "You don't mind blatant public displays of affection, do you Justin?"

"Not if they're directed at me," he joked. "No, I don't mind. I wouldn't be hanging out with you two otherwise, you're pretty famous for it."

"Are we?" asked Ginny, surprised. "I try to restrain myself when it's not just the six of us."

"You fail more than you think," said Justin, grinning. "But it's all right. I do it with Susan occasionally, so I couldn't complain."

Harry saw a concerned look cross Justin's face, in spite of his humor. "I'm sure she's all right, Justin."

"I know," said Justin. Harry recalled that Justin had been with Susan when he'd Apparated her out of Hogwarts. "But she was in a fair bit of pain, even though she was one of the last twenty you got out of there. By the way, Harry... Ginny was telling me, before you got here, about what happened after the Muggles attacked, how McGonagall made you finish evacuating the Hogwarts wounded, even the ones who weren't that bad off, before the attackers. For what it's worth... I see your point, and it's very noble, but I see McGonagall's too. These Muggles, obviously being paid for

what they did—paid by the people who tried to burn three hundred people to death—started firing automatic weapons at what they thought were unarmed teenagers. If I had to be making the decisions, I'd really hesitate before asking people suffering from painful burns to wait and deal with it until after saving the lives of paid killers. Ginny said you were mad at McGonagall, but it's not an unreasonable decision. Not that I know from experience, but it seems to me that if you're a leader, you have to think about your people first."

"I know," said Harry heavily. "And I wouldn't be thrilled to look at Susan and say, 'You had to wait in pain so I could save these other people.' It's just that when that happened, there were about thirty or forty of those people on the ground, bleeding from bullet wounds. I guess I think more about what's right in front of me."

Justin nodded. "I'm not saying I think you're wrong, Harry. I'm not sure there is a right or wrong answer. Just that maybe you shouldn't have been so mad at her. Of course, I thought Ron's idea wasn't a bad one either, about jumping out with the Repulsion Charm. What could be more just than for them to get hit with their own bullets? I didn't exactly cry for Goyle last year, and I wouldn't for them, either."

"I understand. It's just a choice, a judgment we make," said Harry, echoing Dumbledore.

"Funny how you and Hermione are on the one side of that question, and the rest of you—I think—are on the other."

"I think Neville's with Harry and Hermione on that," put in Ginny. "I think he'd make the same choice they would. But you know, Justin, even though Ron, Pansy, and I wouldn't agree with Harry about that... if there was some battle, and

Harry decided to save the lives of some Death Eaters before helping us get helped with our moderate injuries, we wouldn't hold it against him." She gave Harry a serious look before continuing. "We would know that it would pain him to make us wait, but he has to do what he thinks is the right thing. He's certainly earned that."

"I wouldn't argue with that," agreed Justin. Humorously, he added, "And I try not to argue with people who can turn tanks upside down. By the way, isn't there someone inside that tank?"

Harry knew what Justin was driving at, but pretended he didn't. "I assume so."

"And he's still there, right?"

"I assume so." To Justin's nonverbal prompt, he continued, "I think we're seeing the limits of how noble I am. Right after it happened, I was way too busy to think about it, and now... I feel like, to hell with him, he can wait until morning. I'll let him out when the Muggle military people get here, they can take him. He's not going to die, spending a night in an upside-down tank. He almost killed Ron, not to mention Snape."

Justin laughed. "She told me about that, how you threatened him. I couldn't believe it. Getting back at him for all those years of him being a bastard to you?"

Harry smiled, wishing he could tell Justin the truth. "Saving someone's life doesn't seem to be a good way to get back at them, does it? He was endangering us, not to mention himself, and I was mad at him. I did what I did to make sure he got out fast. I really would have done it, would have Apparated him to St. Mungo's."

"Ginny said that, too, that it was really clear that you were serious. Which only makes it funnier."

"Always happy to amuse my friends. Usually I do it by being made fun of, but this is fine, too." Justin and Ginny chuckled as they continued walking.

Upon returning to the castle a half an hour later, Harry and Ginny headed for McGonagall's quarters. Harry had pulled out his Hogwarts map before realizing it wouldn't work.

"Guess we have to find her the old-fashioned way, by looking," joked Ginny. Fortunately for them, it turned out that she was in fact in her quarters.

Harry knocked. There was a pause, then a frustrated noise. "Just a moment," they heard McGonagall say from inside. A few seconds later, she opened the door. "Harry, Ginny, come in," she said politely, but Harry could tell that she was under stress.

Still, Harry couldn't resist teasing her a little. "You tried to open the door with your wand, didn't you."

She gave him a reproving look that told him he was right. "It is easy for you to make jokes, your magic still works. I assume that that is not what you came to say."

"No," he said, turning serious. "First, I wanted to apologize for how I reacted when you had me—"

"The evacuation, yes," she interrupted him. "I had a feeling that was why you came. Have a seat, both of you." They sat on her sofa, as she took a chair.

Her expression seemed weary but compassionate. "This is one of those times, Harry, when Albus would have said, 'he is only seventeen,' and he would be right to say it. Decisions

must be made in these situations that may cost lives, and you had to carry out instructions that you did not agree with, perhaps even felt were immoral. It was a highly stressful situation. You may have displayed your displeasure, but at least you did not argue with me."

"Maybe partly because the more time I took doing that, the longer I had to wait to get people out," he admitted. "But I was just talking about this with Justin, and I do see the reason you did that. I guess I just have to get used to the fact that I'm not going to agree with everything you decide."

"Yes, Harry, but there is one other aspect of this which you may want to be aware of. Albus had told me that on a few occasions, such as the question of whether to endorse the ARA, you felt as though if you made a choice that differed from his, you must have made the wrong one. It was not that you had no faith in your own judgment, but that you had such great faith in his, in him as a person in general. Believe me, there have been times when I felt like that.

"Now he is gone, and I am in his position. You are a year older, and more experienced; you have had to make many difficult judgments, and you are becoming more comfortable doing so. In addition, you will not have the same automatic faith in my judgments as you did in his. This is not a criticism," she said quickly, forestalling the objection she saw coming, "simply a statement of fact. I would not wish you to have automatic faith in my judgments, but rather to feel free to make your own. I mention it simply because you must get used to dealing with me rather than him, and it may be an adjustment for you. I know perfectly well that in this situation, he would have made the same choice that you and Hermione would have had me make. But I must make my own judgments, not ones based on what he would have done. It did not tend to happen with Albus, but it may with

me, that you must follow an order that your instincts and values tell you is wrong. I am confident that you will adapt to it. You did well in this situation, considering the circumstances."

Harry wasn't sure that he had. "Thank you, Professor, I appreciate your saying that. But you know I have a lot of respect for you, and whatever you decide. I guess it's that there wasn't much time to think in that situation."

"Not to mention that you had been extremely busy, at the center of a high-stress situation, since the fire broke out," she pointed out. "You have done extraordinarily well this evening, Harry; your fast reactions saved many lives." To Harry's surprise, she laughed softly. "Including Professor Snape's."

Harry and Ginny chuckled. "He told you," said Harry.

"Yes, but I believe some students were watching from a distance, and saw and heard what happened; I have overheard the account being given in the halls. I would have preferred that he keep a better distance. He also should not have argued with you; you were the commander on the scene, as it were, and he was more or less a spectator, albeit an authorized one.

"I have a suggestion for you, Harry, but first I want to know if you have any questions, anything else you wished to discuss."

"I just wondered what would happen tomorrow," he asked. "No classes, I assume?"

"No, certainly not," she confirmed, "not until the security situation is settled, and the first years Sorted, both of which I expect to happen tomorrow. Hogsmeade is, I believe, not

totally magic-deprived; we will do it in the open air if we have to.

"Which brings me to what I wanted to mention. The first years cannot sleep in the dormitories, of course, as they do not yet know to which they belong. Well, two do, but I do not wish to separate them from the rest. They will sleep in the Great Hall tonight. It would be preferable for them not to sleep at the site of so recent a destructive fire, but there is simply no other place for them. I visited with them a half hour ago, and they are somewhat anxious, which is understandable. They are also quite curious about you, which is also understandable. I thought it might be helpful to them if you were to stop by and talk to them for a while. Your presence would be reassuring to them; for many, this may be the first time in their lives that they have been totally unable to do any magic. It may be good for them to know that there is someone around who can."

Harry was reluctant, but could see that it made sense. "You really should, Harry," said Ginny softly, obviously recognizing the possible sensitivity of the topic for Harry. "Think about how you would have felt if this had happened at the beginning of your first year. It wouldn't have bothered you that you couldn't do magic, of course, but the fire would be terrifying enough, and hearing about dozens of armed attackers... you'd have been thinking that the Dursleys were a better bet than this. Think about how they must be feeling."

He nodded. "You're right, of course. I'd have been scared to death, wondering what kind of horror chamber I'd gotten myself into. Okay, I'll go talk to them, stay with them for a while. Now I feel kind of bad, I've been so busy that I hadn't thought about what it was like for them."

"Thank you, Harry," said McGonagall. "Ginny, I wonder if you would be willing to sleep here tonight. On the sofa, or Harry can conjure you a comfortable bed. I need to be able to contact him at a moment's notice, and you are the only way to do that right now."

Ginny smiled. "Little did I know that having the Joining of Hands done would make me a 'conduit of communication,' as Professor Snape put it. But no, I don't mind at all. The sofa looks fine, but I'm just curious, Harry, how are you at beds?"

"I'll try to come as close as I can to the ones Albus did for Hermione and I that night," he said. Focusing on how that bed had looked and felt, including blankets and pillows, then moving aside McGonagall's coffee table, he waved his wand, and a bed appeared. Giving Harry an impressed look, she climbed into it. "Wow, very nice. You do good work."

"I learned from the best," he replied. To McGonagall, he asked, "Oh, what about the others? How long will Ron and Pansy be patrolling Hogsmeade?"

"I have asked them to continue until one o'clock. I have also asked Professor Snape to prepare a Wakefulness Potion for Neville and Hermione; they will patrol Hogsmeade until seven a.m., at which time either the Muggles will arrive, or you and Ginny will take over until they do."

"Okay, I understand. I'll give Ginny a call on her hand if anything happens." Harry started to leave, then looked back at Ginny, lying on her side in the bed he'd conjured. "Good night," he said.

Before Ginny could respond, McGonagall stood. "I am going into the bedroom; you may say goodnight privately." Harry couldn't tell by her tone whether she intended any humor or

not. After she closed the bedroom door behind her, Harry bent over and gave her a long kiss. "I love you," he said.

"I love you too, and I'm proud of you," she replied. Harry felt very good as he left McGonagall's quarters.

Harry walked into the Great Hall, and saw immediately that half of the tables, presumably the ones that had sustained the most fire damage, had been moved to one end of the room, pushed against the wall so that half of the room was open space. Most of the students were sitting at what would normally be the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables. Some were talking; some seemed adrift, not knowing what to do.

Harry walked up to the space between the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables. He saw some students' eyes go wide on seeing him. "Hi. I'm Harry Potter." Now everyone stopped talking, all eyes on him. "I'm a seventh-year student, but I'm also a teacher. I'll be teaching you Defense Against the Dark Arts. It's an important subject." He deliberately paused, looking around, and added, "Which I guess you can kind of tell." Some students giggled nervously.

"Here, let me do something," he said as he headed past the tables to the open part of the Hall. "It's hard to talk at these tables, so I want to make a carpet, we can all just sit down." He conjured a large, thick red carpet, ten yards long and ten yards wide. As the carpet appeared, the students oohed and ahed. Harry sat down on the carpet, saying, "Anyone who wants to talk a bit, please, come over here and sit down. It's probably more comfortable than the tables." Students hurried over, and soon all forty were sitting in front of him, most looking eager.

Be yourself, he told himself. Think about how they must feel. "One thing I want to say is that what happened today

doesn't usually happen." He heard more nervous giggling. "I mean, you're probably thinking, fires? Attacks? What kind of a place is this? But usually it's quiet and peaceful, just with classes and people doing magic and studying and playing outside. It's a nice place, I look forward to coming here every year. You just had bad luck, that this happened on your first day here. But we're doing our best to get things back to normal."

A black-haired girl raised her hand. "Professor?"

"Yes, what's your name?"

"Sandra Branford, sir. Is it true that a plant caused all this?"

"Yes, Sandra. The Death Eaters—which, you may know, are Voldemort's assistants—they planted this plant all over Hogwarts. The plants grew, and if there are a lot of them, they cause magic not to work. That's what happened, and it just happened at a really bad time. But we'll get it fixed."

"How?" she asked. He was surprised and pleased to see that his mention of Voldemort's name had caused only the mildest of reactions.

"Phoenixes will help us," he said as Fawkes burst into view, prompting louder ooohs and ahhs than his conjuring the carpet had. "This is Fawkes, he and some other phoenixes will help."

"Is he yours?" asked a brown-haired boy sitting at the front.

"I'm sorry, but when you ask a question, please say your name, I'd like to get to know all of you. What's your name?"

"Dennis Forest, sir."

"Ah. I have a friend named Dennis, he's on the Quidditch team with me. About Fawkes, I wouldn't say he's 'mine' because phoenixes don't belong to people. They can disappear and appear anywhere, so you can't capture them. They choose the people they want to spend time with." Smiling, he added, "So, in a way, I'm kind of his." Many students laughed. "Seriously, the people that phoenixes choose are called 'companions,' and once a phoenix chooses you, he or she stays with you for the rest of your life. I was really, really happy that a phoenix chose me. Fawkes, can you say hello to the first years?"

Fawkes sang, and half the students' mouths dropped open in amazement; he stopped after a half a minute, and the students applauded. Harry smiled at their enthusiasm. A blond girl raised her hand and said, "Sir, can-sorry, sir, my name is Darlene Tifton. Sir, could he say hello again?"

Harry and most of the students laughed. "Well, Darlene, he can't do it all the time, because-" He was interrupted by Fawkes singing again, prompting a little more laughter. Harry stayed quiet as this song lasted almost a minute. After Fawkes stopped, Harry heard awed exclamations, students whispering 'wow!' and 'cool!' I would have thought that was pretty cool when I first got to Hogwarts, thought Harry. Of course, it still is, I'm just used to it.

"Thank you, Fawkes," said Harry after Fawkes stopped. "Anyway, the plant is one phoenixes really like, so Fawkes has talked to other phoenixes. Some of them are already here, and more will be coming. They'll be around until we get our magic back, so that'll be nice."

Another student raised his hand. "I'm Timothy Zeller, sir. You said that he talked to other phoenixes? Can he talk to us?"

Harry smiled. "Sorry, bad choice of words on my part. When I said 'talk,' I meant 'communicate.' Phoenixes communicate without words, by sending images and feelings. They can communicate with each other easily; they can communicate with people, but only the one they've chosen. Fawkes knows how I'm feeling, and I can know how he's feeling."

"How is he feeling, sir?" asked Timothy.

"Good question, just a minute," said Harry. He closed his eyes and cleared his mind, and soon had an answer. "He's kind of... excited right now, this is an interesting time for him. He's happy that he was able to tell the other phoenixes about a place where there's so much food, and he's also happy that there'll be a lot of phoenixes around here for a while. Usually if he's with me he can't be with other phoenixes, but right now, he can do both. So, he likes it. But he also feels a little stressed, because today was a stressful day for me, and that affects him. If I feel something, he feels it too, especially if he's close to me. That's why phoenixes are very careful about who they choose; they don't want to be around someone who feels bad a lot."

Darlene raised her hand. "Did he choose you because you use the energy of love?"

"Another good question. By the way, everyone knows what that is, right? It's a new kind of magical energy I found last year, and it lets me do stuff most wizards can't do. It's also what's letting me do magic now, even though the plants are around."

A blond boy raised his hand. "My name is Evan Snowdon, sir. Why don't the plants affect it?"

"I don't know, Evan. This energy I use, and my friends now use, it's very new. We don't know a lot about it. I learn things

from experience. But to answer your question, Darlene... I'm not sure you can say there's any one reason he chose me. But I have a feeling that had something to do with it. If I asked him—not with words, just the way phoenixes communicate—the answer would just be that I seemed like a good person to choose; he wouldn't think in terms of specific reasons. But it is true that phoenixes are attracted to love, and he joined me about the time I started trying to focus on love so much. So, probably."

"I'm Lisa Wilson, sir. Why did you do that? Focus on love, I mean?"

"Because of Voldemort!" said Sandra, before Harry could answer.

Harry was surprised. "How do you know that, Sandra?"

Looking pleased that Harry had remembered her name, she said proudly, "My parents told me about you before I came here, and they know from reading about you in the newspaper, I think. They said to pay close attention to everything you said."

Smiling, Harry replied, "Well, I'm glad to hear that, but really, you should pay close attention to what every teacher says." A few students giggled, and Harry added, "I understand what they meant, though. But to answer Lisa's question, yes, it was because of Voldemort, but a lot of you may not know how that works, so I should try to explain it. You can understand it a lot better if I do."

He launched into the story of last year's events and how they had pushed him to use love as a defense against Voldemort. Students continued asking questions, which he answered, and he was eventually asked about what had happened after the fires had been put out. He decided to

show them rather than tell them, using the Pensieve, and include the short battle with the Aurors. He wanted them to be able to see that Voldemort could be defeated, or at least made unconscious, and so puncture the mystique of fear and invincibility that Voldemort desired. He Summoned the Pensieve from his office, explained how it worked and how to use it, and showed them the memory in two groups of twenty, which he found could fit with some students sitting and some standing and leaning over. After viewing it, the obviously awed students asked more questions, which he was answering when Ron and Pansy walked into the Great Hall. Harry looked at his watch; the time was twelve forty-five. Wow, I didn't realize how late it was, he thought.

Ron and Pansy walked up to them, Ron looking unusually jovial. He gestured to the Pensieve and gave an inquiring look. To the first years, Harry said, "Everyone, this is Ron Weasley and Pansy Parkinson, two good friends of mine."

One of the first years said, "And they're also boyfriend and girlfriend, aren't they?"

A few students giggled, and Ron and Pansy smiled at each other. Ron said, "That's just a rumor," then, to Harry's great surprise, leaned down and kissed Pansy on the cheek. Embarrassed, pleased, and startled, she glanced up at him as the students roared with laughter, Harry joining them.

"I've heard that rumor," said Harry after he finished laughing. "What's up? Are you finished patrolling?"

"Not quite, but almost," explained Ron. "Just going to see McGonagall. Another thirty attackers, wanted to let her know."

Harry leaped to his feet as the first years exchanged anxious looks. "Thirty? We've got to—"

"Relax, Harry, it's over," said Ron, still smiling. "D'you think I'd be in here making jokes and kissing Pansy if they were still running around? Give me a little credit. We took care of it."

"He took care of it," corrected Pansy. "I mostly just watched."

"I wouldn't say that," said Ron modestly.

"Well, c'mon, tell us," urged Harry. "Oh, wait, you've got to see McGonagall, you should do that first. Pansy, can you stay and tell us while he does that?"

"Since you have this here, I'll just let you see it," she suggested. She started moving the memory over as Ron headed to McGonagall's quarters. Twenty of the eager first years crowded around as Harry stood and leaned over, and they all put their fingers in.

Ron and Pansy were walking down a side street in Hogsmeade, having just turned off the main street. "Looks clear, as usual," said Ron. "Not much happening in Hogsmeade at twelve-thirty in the morning. Fortunately for us."

"I hope it'll be this quiet for Neville and Hermione," said Pansy.

"Me, too," agreed Ron. "I think it will be, they've probably done all they're going to do. Check the roof again?"

"Sure," she said, and suddenly they were on the roof of a three-story building, the tallest in Hogsmeade. "Looks like—oh, no! Look!"

She pointed to the Hogwarts gate, which was rapidly being approached by a group of what were unmistakably armed

Muggles. "We just looked thirty seconds ago! How did that happen?" asked a disbelieving Ron.

"Never mind that, what are we going to do?" asked Pansy urgently. "They're almost through the gate! They're going to get through before we can do anything!"

"The hell they are," said Ron, determined. "I'm going to Apparate us both, I want us to be in this exact position when we get there. Focus on keeping the Repulsion Charm going, I'll stand behind you. Okay?"

Pansy nodded, and Ron stood behind her, took her shoulders, and suddenly they were five feet behind the last of the attackers. All were facing forward, but they heard the sounds caused by Ron and Pansy's Apparation. As they turned, Ron reached around Pansy with his wand, and to Harry's amazement, all of the attackers started to rise into the air. Wearing a look of intense concentration, Ron watched them go up, until they were what Harry estimated to be thirty feet in the air. A few of the flailing attackers fired their weapons, again machine guns, but they fired wildly, having no purchase on anything and unable to turn.

"All right, now cut that out, and listen!" shouted Ron as loudly as he could. "You're three storeys up, and a fall's going to be pretty painful. Now, drop your weapons, or I'll drop you!"

Machine guns started to fall from the hands of the likely terrified attackers. After ten seconds, Ron shouted, "Not bad, but that wasn't everyone. I still see at least five of you with your guns. Now—"

One of the attackers started firing, and all started falling. There were cries of alarm as they fell, but they stopped falling about three feet off the ground, and started rising

again. What Harry could see of their faces showed quite a bit of fear.

"Okay, that was a warning," shouted Ron. "Believe me, it's the only one you'll get. Now, the rest of you, drop them!"

Amid cries from the air of 'do it!' and "whoever it is, drop the damn thing!", more machine guns fell. "Is that all of them?" Ron asked Pansy urgently, still concentrating.

"I think so... no, one still has his."

"What's wrong with these people?" wondered Ron, amazed. "I don't want to drop all of them just to teach one a lesson, and he can't hurt us anyway... still... can you whisk it away from this distance?"

"I think so," she replied. "I'll have to drop the Repulsion Charm to do it, of course, but it should be all right."

"Okay. Get behind me, then do it."

Pansy laughed. "I love you too, Ron. No way." She raised her wand and flicked it, and the last machine gun went flying away.

"Good, thanks," said Ron, still focusing hard. "Oh, better yet, can you throw him into the lake? I have an idea."

"I guess I can," said Pansy, her tone suggesting that she didn't understand why Ron wanted her to do it, but not wanting to argue. "I think I need to be closer, though." She ran forward, then the one who hadn't dropped his weapon started to move sideways fast; he yelled in alarm as he went flying into the far side of the lake. Harry wondered why she'd made sure he was that far away.

"If the giant squid in the lake doesn't eat him, he should be all right," announced Ron to the others still hovering in midair. Harry chuckled, now understanding why Ron had asked Pansy to throw him into the lake: the giant squid wasn't dangerous, but the mercenaries didn't know that. As Pansy walked back to him, he added, "Now, when I let you down, if anyone moves, that's what happens to them. Here we go."

He set the mercenaries down, saying, "When you hit the ground, lie down." All did, and Ron and Pansy started wrapping them in ropes. The memory ended, and Harry exited the Pensieve. Pansy put the memory back as Harry watched the first years who had seen it exchange very impressed looks.

"You can show the other ones if they want to see it," said Pansy to Harry on finishing, "but McGonagall may be out any second, and—"

"I understand, I'll show them my memory of it," said Harry. "That was really good, you did it without anyone getting hurt. What about the one in the lake?"

"Oh, we fished him out after we finished wrapping the others," said Pansy offhandedly. "I think the squid was playing with him."

Harry laughed. "Wouldn't surprise me."

McGonagall entered the Hall, followed by Ron. They walked up to Harry and Pansy, the first years watching avidly. "Miss Parkinson," said McGonagall, "if you will come with us, we will collect Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom, and you can help get rid of these thirty; then you and Mr. Weasley will be finished for the night."

"I'd be happy to-" started Harry, but was cut off by McGonagall.

"The others can handle it," replied McGonagall. "I would say you have already done enough for the night." Gesturing to the first years, she asked, "And why are they not asleep?"

"No one's mentioned anything about being tired," answered Harry with a straight face. A few first years giggled.

"Why, Professor, your sense of humor is coming along quite nicely," said McGonagall sarcastically. "Well, it is nearly one o'clock, and everyone in this room will be roused at no later than seven-thirty, so I suggest you encourage them along in their tiredness. Mr. Weasley, Miss Parkinson..." She walked away briskly, and Ron and Pansy both gave a little shrug to Harry and the first years before following her.

Harry turned to the first years. "Unfortunately, she is right about it being late. I'll put the memory back in so the rest of you can see it, and then we should start thinking about going to sleep." A few started protesting, saying they weren't tired, which made Harry smile. "I know how you feel," he said. "But things at Hogwarts run on a schedule, and sometimes you have to try to sleep even if you're not that tired. But you must be a little tired; I can't believe your parents let you stay up this late every night." He put the memory into the Pensieve, and as the first years watched it, he started conjuring sleeping bags and pillows. After they finished, he let them stay up for another ten minutes so they could talk about what they'd seen and ask him questions. Finally, he told them it was time for bed, and had them get into their sleeping bags.

"Will you be sleeping here too, Professor?" asked a girl, obviously hopefully. A quick glance around the room told

Harry that it was a popular idea. Guess I can't blame them, he thought. Considering the latest attack, they're probably wondering, what if something gets by Hermione and Neville.

"Yes, I will," he replied. "It's been a while since I've slept in a sleeping bag." He conjured one for himself, and climbed inside. Fawkes, who had left in the middle of Harry's talk with them, returned, and again Harry wondered whether this had been his idea or Fawkes's. "I know this has been a hard day for everyone, and it might be a bit hard to sleep. So, Fawkes is going to be nice, and help us out."

To Harry's great surprise, five more phoenixes appeared in the next few seconds, forming a rough circle around Harry and the first years. Harry was amazed as Fawkes nonverbally confirmed what Harry had assumed. "Believe me, you're going to have no trouble sleeping," announced Harry. "What you're about to hear is extremely rare for anyone to hear. Good night, everyone."

He heard many voices saying, "Good night, Professor," then the six phoenixes started singing. The first years made a few awed and amazed noises, then became quiet, listening to the phoenixes. Harry lay back, started his Occlumency exercises while at the same time enjoying the song, and was asleep in ten minutes.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 11, Muggles at Hogwarts: Muggle military officers arrive to protect Hogwarts, but a lack of close contact between the two worlds leads to unanticipated consequences.

From Chapter 11: Barclay turned to Ingersoll, now annoyed. "Captain, I am not your direct superior, and was making a request, not giving an order. But I can send orders down

through the chain of command that you will find most unpleasant once you get them. Now, I ask you again, will you and your men keep such distance from the phoenixes as Professor Potter requests?"

11. Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Muggles at Hogwarts

Harry awoke to see Ginny looking down at him. "Sorry, but they need the room for breakfast," she said. Whispering now, she added, "It was really nice of you to sleep here. I've talked to a few of them, and I can tell it made them feel better."

He nodded, not wanting to whisper or answer out loud. Sitting up, he saw most of the first years sitting near their sleeping bags, talking; a few were watching him talk to Ginny. "Well, I probably slept enough anyway. I assume nothing happened during the night. Are Neville and Hermione tired?"

"They say they're not," said Ginny, as Harry stood and started Vanishing sleeping bags and pillows; he found that she had already taken care of most of them before he woke up. "Snape definitely knows his potions. I think Ron and Pansy aren't up yet, they're in guest quarters. McGonagall wanted them to be able to sleep in a little, considering how late they were up."

"That was nice of her. Well, I'd better shower, change, and get some breakfast. Kind of nice that I can do all that in my quarters now if I want to." He headed off and returned to the Hall in half an hour, feeling refreshed, and grateful that Hogwarts' plumbing did not rely on magic.

Entering the Hall again, he found that the tables had been restored to their normal positions. He had forgotten to

Vanish the carpet, so he assumed Ginny must have done it. He found her, along with Neville and Hermione, at their normal spot at the table. He also found a tray in his spot. "It's not going to be piping hot, but it's better than nothing," said Ginny.

"I'll take it," said Harry, picking up a fork. "Hi, you two. I guess, I hope, you had a nice, boring night in Hogsmeade?"

"I don't know about 'nice,' but definitely boring," said Hermione in between bites of her breakfast. "I'm not complaining; we always have things to talk about. Especially last night, since so much happened. But we don't know so much about what happened with you, so if you could fill us in..."

Harry spent the next ten minutes doing that, while trying to eat soon enough that his food didn't get any colder. "Well, your night definitely wasn't boring," she commented. "As for us, even before our patrols, we weren't doing anything exciting. After we finished Apparating the wounded mercenaries out, we had to do the wrapped ones as well, then as you know we were assigned to Flitwick and Sprout to go around doing stuff. Like, I went into the Ravenclaw common room to start their fire. It was really great, they have a little library right in their common room! A few long bookcases, filled with some of the most useful books. It even has three copies of 'Hogwarts, A History.' Anthony was teasing me, saying, 'Now, don't you wish the Hat had put you in Ravenclaw?' Of course, I don't, but I know what he meant."

"Well, your trunk is practically a library," said Harry; Hermione gave him a 'very funny' look. "Sorry, Ron's not here, so somebody had to say it."

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, I was just thinking, that's something Ron would say."

"He'll be pleased I stepped in for him," joked Harry. "But why did you have to go in? Couldn't they have just used matches?"

"I don't think there are any matches at Hogwarts," she pointed out. "A lot of things that you and I would take for granted because we grew up with Muggles just aren't common in the magical world, because they aren't necessary. It's like, you don't think about getting water from a well, because we have faucets. But if the faucets stopped working, you might have to think about a well. Anyway, just a lot of stuff like that. I had to conjure big blocks of ice so the stuff in the kitchens wouldn't go bad. There's lots of food, the elves just can't cook it now. Especially lots of meat, which even if it's kept refrigerated is going to go bad by the time we get magic back. I was thinking, we should have a big cookout on the grounds. Do you think you can conjure up fifty barbecue grills, Harry?"

"If I can do one, I can do fifty," he said, though he knew she was joking. "I'd have to look at one closely, I think. I've never tried to conjure anything made of metal before, but I guess it shouldn't be any different. Oh, speaking of metal, I need to go get that guy out of the tank."

"It's okay, we got him out last night," said Neville. "McGonagall had us do it after we'd finished Apparating out the thirty that Ron and Pansy got."

"Have any trouble?" asked Harry.

Ginny smiled at Harry. "He wants to know if he's the only one that can lift a tank."

"I would, if it were me," said Neville. "It was pretty impressive."

"The answer, Harry, is no, but that was with all of us," explained Hermione. "It was funny, actually. McGonagall said we should get him out of there, so we walked over. Pansy yelled, 'Are you still in there?' We heard this voice yelling, 'Let me out of this damn thing!' Pansy said, 'I don't know, you almost killed my boyfriend. You should say 'please.' The rest of us laughed, and McGonagall gave Pansy one of her best disapproving looks. The man yelled, 'Please let me out of this damn thing!' Pansy really wanted to say something else, but she didn't because of McGonagall."

"So, Ron said, 'I'll have a go. If I can lift thirty people...' He tried, and nothing happened. Then he said, '...it doesn't mean I can lift a tank, apparently.' Neville tried, and he made it wobble a bit, but that was it. Ron said, 'Wow, I knew Harry was strong, but this is really amazing.' We were all agreeing, and finally McGonagall said, 'Yes, let us all stipulate to the fact Harry's strength is most impressive. Now, I would like to get some sleep tonight, so if you would lift it together and get on with it...' Harry and Ginny started laughing; Hermione wasn't imitating McGonagall's tone, but Harry could easily imagine it. "So we did, and McGonagall told him that he'd better come out hands first and with nothing in them, or she'd have us drop it again. He did, and Neville wrapped him up while the rest of us put the tank down. We left it upside down so nobody would get the idea to jump into it and try to use it. Also, as a little monument to Harry's strength." She and the others smiled at Harry's predictable embarrassed expression.

"Well, I spent most of the night being McGonagall's shadow, and I think that's how I'm going to spend most of the next few days," said Ginny. "I'm not complaining, it was pretty

interesting. But it's a real comment on how important she considers Harry that even though I'm one of only six people here who can do magic, I'm more important to her as a way to communicate with Harry than for any other reason."

"I think she also wants you with her so you can do magic she needs done," suggested Harry.

"You're cute when you're overly modest," she chided him, grinning. "No, it's because of you. It's what I would do if I were her. If there's another attack, she either wants to let you know immediately, or for you to let her know if you find out first. You're important to this situation, so she always wants to know where you are."

Harry was about to respond when Augustina and Hedrick walked up. "Hi, Professor," said Augustina.

"Hi there, what's up?" asked Harry.

"We've just been talking to the first years," said Augustina. "It was nice the way you talked to them last night. Not only did it help them, but now they're pretty popular, because they know lots of stuff the rest of us didn't, that you showed them in that thing. They saw you knock out Voldemort-that sounded great-and they saw Ron lift those people, so everybody wants to hear about it. It's a good way for them to get to know people."

"And Harry did it just for that reason, he knew that would happen," teased Hermione. At Harry's annoyed look, she said, "Well, it's what Ron would say."

Now he chuckled. "Yes, it is. No, I didn't know that would happen, but I'm glad it did. It must be especially strange for them because they didn't get to be Sorted, so they probably

feel sort of... lost, maybe. Like they don't know where they belong."

"I'd probably feel that way, if I were them," agreed Hedrick. "Anyway, we mainly came to tell you, if you didn't know, that the Muggles just arrived. They seem to be setting things up, kind of between the lake and the gate."

Harry nodded, impressed. "That's the best place, since those are the two places we could be attacked. Thanks, Hedrick, I should go take a look. I hope they don't scare the phoenixes. That reminds me, there should be a lot of them by now, right?"

"It looked like, over a hundred," confirmed Augustina. "It's really amazing."

"Well, that's something I have to go see," said Harry. "How about the rest of you?"

"I'll try to go look later," said Ginny, "but McGonagall wanted me back as soon as I finished breakfast and showered, and I still have to do that. See you later." She got up and left the Hall. Neville and Hermione were interested, so the three of them went out to the Quidditch pitch.

It was a bright, clear morning; warm, but not too warm. About thirty students were spread out around the area near the pitch, talking and watching the phoenixes. Harry walked up to Hannah, who looked positively enraptured. "Pretty nice, aren't they?" he asked, with deliberate understatement.

She smiled brilliantly. "Oh, Harry, they're so beautiful... and do you know how rare it is for humans to get to see this many at once? This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance, it's incredible. Every minute I'm not in classes or eating, I'm

going to be out here. I just want to watch them, see how they eat, if they interact with each other... just everything about them. I'm curious, do you know what's going on with them? I mean, do you get any impressions, as a phoenix companion?"

He shook his head. "Any impressions I get are just from Fawkes. But I could ask him about the others, and he'd tell me if he could. I'll try asking how they feel about us watching them." He knew that Fawkes was among the many phoenixes they could see, but he didn't know which one. He relayed Fawkes's response to his silent question. "He says they don't mind. Some of them are bonded to humans, so they're used to them. Even the ones that aren't find comfort in numbers. They'd only get nervous if they were approached by someone with bad intentions, which they'd know right away. I got the impression that they're a little leery of the Muggle troops, but fortunately, they aren't near where any of the plants are."

"Are they afraid of the Muggles?" asked Neville. "Do they think they might hurt them?"

"Not exactly. It's more that they don't get a good impression from them. I'd guess you need a particular frame of mind to be in the military, and it's not one that phoenixes find attractive."

"I don't doubt it, it's not one I find attractive, either," said a familiar voice from behind them. Harry turned to see Hugo looking at the phoenixes. "They are lovely, aren't they?"

"Hi, Hugo. I'm always surprised when I see you in these situations, and then I realize I shouldn't be surprised. Of course, this is big news. Now that I think about it, I'm a little surprised you weren't here last night."

"Kingsley didn't want anybody here last night who wasn't already here, the security situation was too unsettled," explained Hugo. "Of course, I wanted to come. But I've just spent some time talking to some first years, so I'm up to speed now."

Harry laughed, because it was more or less true. "Don't need me at all then, do you?" he joked.

"No, I actually do want an interview, sometime today if it's okay, whenever's best for you. I know you're busy, or at least, you may be soon, if not right this second."

"I understand," said Harry. "I should talk to Professor McGonagall, see if she has anything in mind for me right away. I just wanted to take a few minutes right now to enjoy the view." He turned his head away from Hugo and back to the phoenixes.

"I know what you mean," agreed Hugo, taking out a camera. "I don't always bring this along, but in this story, the pictures are almost as important as the text. The phoenixes, the Muggles setting up shop over there, whatever damage to the Great Hall hasn't been repaired yet, the overturned tank... say, any chance I can get a picture of you in front of the tank?"

Neville and Hermione laughed as Harry turned his head in mild annoyance. Hermione said, "Harry, I thought you liked to be teased, because it meant the person liked you."

Harry couldn't help but smile a little. "Seems like more and more people 'like' me all the time, in that case."

"What can I say, Harry, there's just something about you that makes people want to 'like' you," joked Hugo. Turning solemn, he added, "Also, I already got some pictures of the

students you Apparated out last night; I was able to go to St. Mungo's. There are plenty of people, Harry, who are sure they wouldn't be alive right now if it weren't for you. And the others, of course," he said, glancing at Neville and Hermione.

"No, it's okay, it is mainly him," said Neville. "He's the one that comes up with new spells whenever he needs them. Even the four of us, us two with Ron and Ginny, barely managed to take care of the Gryffindor table and start on Hufflepuff before he had everything done."

"Most of the wounded are Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws," said Hugo. "I assume that's because they were the inner tables, and harder to get to."

"I guess it's just natural to take care of where you are first, then do whatever's easiest to reach," agreed Harry. "I wish I could have gotten to them sooner."

"Nobody blames you, Harry, believe me," Hugo assured him. "You already did far more than you should have been able to."

Harry reluctantly nodded, still looking at the phoenixes. "I suppose so. I hope I can get a chance to visit them today."

"A lot will be coming back," Hugo pointed out. "The people at St. Mungo's told me that they think two-thirds will be back today, and even the more serious cases, later this week."

"What?" asked Harry incredulously. "Some of those people had major burns, and that takes weeks to heal, and leaves all kinds of scarring. How can they be back so fast?"

"It takes weeks with Muggles, Harry," explained Hermione. "Not with wizards. There are magical ways to treat burns, even serious ones, which are much better than anything Muggles can do. They'll heal fast, and there won't be any scars."

More things about the wizarding world I didn't know, he thought. "I'm really glad to hear that."

He was about to make another comment when he heard McGonagall's voice. "Harry, there you are. Would you come with me, please? There is someone I would like you to meet. Mr. Brantell, you may come along, provided you keep a certain distance." It must be whoever's in charge of the Muggles, thought Harry. He took a last look at the phoenixes, then reluctantly followed McGonagall.

She led him over to a small group of people about ten yards away from the Muggle vehicle and troops. Harry saw one person in black robes, one in deep crimson robes, and to his surprise, a man in a Muggle business suit. He had assumed all the military people would be wearing uniforms.

As they got closer Harry saw that the two wizards were Bright and Kingsley, but he still didn't recognize the Muggle, though he did look familiar somehow. The three turned to greet them. "Harry," said McGonagall, "this is Kenneth Barclay, the Prime Minister. Mr. Barclay, Professor Harry Potter."

Harry tried not to let his surprise show on his face. He found that his reaction had nothing to do with being impressed that he was meeting the Prime Minister, but surprise that the Prime Minister would bother to visit Hogwarts. Barclay extended his hand, which Harry shook. "I'm pleased to meet you, Professor," said Barclay politely, pausing slightly before

the last word. "Sorry, I can't help but react with surprise at seeing a professor who is quite so young. Or are you perhaps older than you appear?"

"No, I'm seventeen," replied Harry, interested in the notion that people could use magic to look younger. "But sometimes I feel a lot older."

Barclay nodded. "Yes, I have been briefed on your situation, if not your exact age. It sounds as though you have been through quite a lot."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Harry. "I'm curious, sir, why are you here? I'm surprised that you'd be involved with something like our getting troops."

Barclay seemed both surprised and amused that Harry had asked the question; Harry suddenly got the impression that no one else had. "Yes, it is quite true that this situation does not necessitate my personal involvement, except insofar as actually approving the deployment. But I was briefed on the situation with magic when I became Prime Minister, and I confess to having had some curiosity about it since then. So, when this request was made yesterday, I thought I should come out here to see what the troops would be seeing. It seems to have been worthwhile already, if only to see those magnificent birds."

"Yes, they're really nice," Harry agreed, as he wondered what he was supposed to say to a Prime Minister. "Of course, because of the situation, you're not going to see much magic around here right now."

"Well, I did catch a glimpse of that tank outside the gates," said Barclay, with what Harry thought might be amusement, but wasn't sure. "An upside-down tank is not something one sees every day. I am told, by the way, that you did that

because it was firing on you. Why did you not do something more destructive? Surely no one would have blamed you."

"I don't make it a priority to learn destructive spells," said Harry, thinking it was an understatement, but not wanting to explain the energy of love to a Muggle. "I'd rather do defensive things, so—"

He cut himself off as he got a strong impression from Fawkes. He turned around and saw thirty phoenixes take flight suddenly, then a few more, as one of the Muggles approached the Quidditch pitch. Some flew to an area near Hagrid's hut, some flew to a different location, and a few disappeared. To Bright, Kingsley, and McGonagall, he said, "Something just happened that really disturbed the phoenixes. Fawkes?"

Fawkes burst into view and settled onto Harry's shoulder, as Barclay gave a start, then looked impressed. "I'm going to ask Fawkes what's going on," he said to McGonagall, "can you give me a minute? I think it's important."

McGonagall nodded, and Harry tried to shut out her explanation to Barclay about how phoenixes bonded and communicated with humans as he focused on the impressions he was getting from Fawkes. After a minute, he spoke. "Fawkes says that it was that man's approaching them that made them nervous. They don't want to be within a certain range of him. Probably the other... military people as well," he added, trying not to use the word 'Muggle.'

"But your students are much closer to the birds than Captain Ingersoll got," pointed out Barclay, clearly surprised. "Is there something they know about handling phoenixes that our men need to know?"

"Not 'handling' them, exactly," said Harry. "Is he the commander of the troops?" Barclay nodded. "Could he join us? I need to explain something to him."

"Of course," said Barclay, "but I have no way to communicate with him at the moment, except shouting, and he is a bit too far away for that."

"Let me see if I can do it," said Harry. He took out his wand, and a medium-sized, shaggy silver dog suddenly appeared. It barked, then ran off to find Ingersoll. As Barclay watched, eyes wide, Harry explained the purpose of the spell. Out of the corner of his eye, he could have sworn he saw Kingsley and McGonagall exchange a smile. The dog reached Ingersoll, jumping a little and pawing at him. Ingersoll tried to push the dog away, then Harry saw Hermione approach him and talk to him for a few seconds, pointing in their direction. She walked with him to Harry and the others.

With a glance, Harry thanked Hermione. "My apologies, Captain," said Barclay to Ingersoll, "it appears that is how they summon people around here; Professor Potter had my authorization to attempt to get your attention."

"Harry Potter," said Harry, extending his hand.

"Captain Martin Ingersoll," the man said, shaking Harry's hand. "What is this about, Mr. Barclay?"

"The young professor has something important he needs us to understand, I believe, about those birds, the phoenixes," explained Barclay. "Professor?"

Harry first made sure they understood how important the phoenixes were to the current situation, then gave some background on phoenixes. Finally, he said, "The phoenixes flew away because they could see that you don't like them;

they don't know that you wouldn't harm them, even by accident, in some situation. It's very important that they not be disturbed; they're the key to us getting our magic back and ending this situation."

Ingersoll looked puzzled and annoyed. "What do you mean, I don't like them? I have no particular opinion about them. What gave them that impression? All I did was walk out there, they flew away before I even got close."

"Sorry, I chose the wrong word," said Harry. "I didn't mean 'don't like' as 'dislike,' but as 'absence of liking.' See, phoenixes usually only are around wizards, and everyone knows about them; almost everyone likes them. Fawkes tells me that you view them the same as if they were, say, pigeons; if one got killed, too bad, but no big deal. Phoenixes are very sensitive, they can know things like that. They don't want to be anywhere near someone who has that attitude."

Ingersoll gave him an obviously skeptical stare. "If that's true, then why is this one still around?" he asked, gesturing to Fawkes, still on Harry's shoulder.

"I'm bonded to him, and he trusts me. He knows I wouldn't let you do anything to harm him."

Ingersoll chuckled for a second, then stopped himself. "Not that I plan to, but I don't think you could stop me if I wanted to."

Unable to help himself, Harry laughed, and he saw Kingsley stifle a chuckle. Ingersoll looked at him indignantly. "Harry..." warned McGonagall.

"Sorry," he said to her, then stared at Ingersoll.

"Captain," said Barclay, "I suppose you must have noticed that tank out there. I am told that this young man is the one who did that. I suspect he could protect this phoenix if he wanted to. In any case, I am requesting that you keep whatever distance from the phoenixes Professor Potter asks, unless necessary in actual combat. Will you do as I request?"

Ingersoll came to attention, even though Harry understood that Barclay was not technically his commanding officer.

"Yes, sir!"

Harry sighed deeply. To Barclay, he said, "I'm sorry, sir, but he's lying. He has no intention of making any special effort to stay away from them. And he doesn't mind lying to you about that, since you're not in a position to give him a direct order. He wanted to humor you, and be left alone to do his job."

Ingersoll gaped at Harry, and Barclay was clearly surprised as well. "You can know that?" asked Barclay. Kingsley gave a brief explanation of Legilimency, after which Barclay turned to Ingersoll, now annoyed. "Captain, I am not your direct superior, and was making a request, not giving an order. But I can send orders down through the chain of command that you will find most unpleasant once you get them. Now, I ask you again, will you and your men keep such distance from the phoenixes as Professor Potter requests?"

"Yes, sir!" repeated Ingersoll.

Barclay looked at Harry questioningly. "He's telling the truth this time, sir," reported Harry.

"Glad to hear it," said Barclay sardonically. "Listen to me carefully, Captain. You are in command of this mission, but the reason we are here is that we want to cooperate with the magical community, and your presence is a part of that

cooperation. You are here to see that the area remains secure, and to extend goodwill to these people, and to their phoenixes if they ask us to. If you don't feel able to do both, I will withdraw your squad and send another one, with no prejudice to your career. Would you like to be relieved of this assignment?"

"No, sir!" said Ingersoll, staring straight ahead.

"Very well, then. Please feel free to get on with your duties." Ingersoll saluted, then moved off to join the other troops. Turning to face the wizards, Barclay said, "I'm sorry about that. Our military officers aren't used to having to consider such things as whether birds will be disturbed by their activities."

"Very understandable," said Bright. "We do not take offense."

"I'm sorry I had to do that, sir," said Harry to Barclay. "Normally I wouldn't, it's just that it's extremely important that the phoenixes be left alone. I don't blame him for being annoyed, he didn't even do anything. This must all be pretty strange for them."

"No doubt," agreed Barclay. "Well, Professor McGonagall, you mentioned something about a tour of the castle, which sounded very interesting indeed. Will you be coming along, Professor Potter?"

"Actually," said Harry, looking at McGonagall, "I'd really like to visit the people at St. Mungo's, I was hoping—"

"You can do more than that, Professor; you can take some of them back," she said. "Madam Pomfrey will let you know which are ready to come back. Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom may assist you if they feel up to it."

"Professor Snape told us that we'd probably be awake through this evening," said Hermione, "so yes, I'd like to, and I'm sure Neville will too."

"I'm going to stay behind for a moment, discuss a few security issues with Harry," said Kingsley to McGonagall. She seemed to regard him suspiciously, then nodded, and headed off to the castle with Bright and Barclay in tow.

"What security issues?" Harry asked as they walked away.

Kingsley waited a few seconds, then said quietly, "There aren't any, really. That was my way of not being dragged along for the tour. You're not the only one who'd rather not spend time with politicians if he can help it."

"I've been training with you for a long time, but I see there are still things I can learn from you," said Harry humorously.

"I certainly hope so," responded Kingsley. "Well, I'm getting back to work, there really are things to do."

"How are you getting back?" wondered Harry.

"We've defined the edge of the area in which magic has been neutralized, and it's at about the outer parts of Hogsmeade, a half mile away. It's a four-minute jog, or a ten-minute walk. But if you wanted to give me a lift, I wouldn't say no."

"No problem." To Hermione, he said, "I'll see you in a few minutes at St. Mungo's, right?" She nodded, and he put his hands on Kingsley's shoulders and Disapparated.

After lunch, the Great Hall was cleared of all students except for a few, and the two long teachers' tables were moved together parallel to each other, creating one wider table.

Sitting at the head of the table at one end were McGonagall and Kingsley. Along one side of the table sat Ingersoll, John, Sprout, Hagrid, Ron, and Neville; along the other side were Snape, Harry, Dentus, Flitwick, Hermione, Pansy, and Ginny. At the other end were Ernie Macmillan and Padma Patil.

"Very well, we are all here, so we will get underway," said McGonagall. "This meeting is to coordinate our information and activities, to make sure everyone who needs to know what is going on knows. First, I would like us to address the most pressing question, that of Hogwarts' defense. That is the responsibility of Captain Ingersoll, who leads the non-magical defense of Hogwarts, and Professor Potter, in charge of the magical defense. Captain Ingersoll, firstly, I thank you on behalf of Hogwarts, and the magical community in general for being here. Would you please brief everyone on your responsibilities and activities?"

Ingersoll looked a little nervous, which Harry supposed was understandable, considering that this had to be by far the strangest assignment he had ever had. While McGonagall had talked, he looked around the table more than others, especially looking at Hagrid uneasily more than once. As he noticed this, Harry had to stifle a smile.

"I am the leader of what we call a Special Forces squad," began Ingersoll. "There are fifty of us, currently divided into five groups of ten. One is on the Hogwarts grounds; the other four are at various locations in Hogsmeade. Our function is primarily defensive; we are not to engage in combat unless we are directly threatened. If we make visual contact with enemy forces, the group leader is to call Professor Potter, who will... appear there immediately, I am told. I will then be contacted, as will the other students who can use magic. It is hoped that Professor Potter will be able

to use magic to resolve the situation without casualties, as Mr. Weasley and Miss Parkinson did last night.

"In addition, later today, an anti-aircraft battery manned by a team of four is scheduled to arrive. Mr. Shacklebolt has explained the possible aerial threat to the castle, so this measure has been taken. This area is far from commercial flight lanes, so any aircraft flying towards Hogwarts and descending will be considered an enemy, and fired upon."

"Thank you, Captain. Professor Potter, do you have anything to add relating to Hogwarts' defense?"

"Just that if there's an air attack at a time when there's not a land attack, I could take Fawkes into the airplane to make sure that it's an enemy. I'd hate for them to shoot down something that wasn't. But is an air attack all that likely? I mean, you need a military plane to drop bombs, I thought."

"It would not be beyond the Dark Lord's capabilities to subvert the crews of, say, a Royal Air Force airplane for long enough to accomplish the task," pointed out Snape. "We must also consider the possibility of a plane on a suicide run. The pilot could be put under the Imperius Curse to do such a thing. The Curse would lose effect once the plane reached a point within a half-mile of Hogwarts, but the pilot could be instructed to aim the plane and take his own life before reaching that point. I assume, however, that the anti-aircraft weapons would be effective against that." Ingersoll nodded.

Kingsley spoke. "Harry, you can't get onto the plane anyway, can you? You know you can't Apparate from a stationary point onto a moving object."

"Fawkes can do it," responded Harry. "Let me make sure, anyway." Fawkes appeared and perched on Harry's shoulder.

It took only a few seconds for Harry to get the answer. "Yes, he can do it, he's sure of it. So, if I try to do that, I'll have to tell the anti-aircraft people not to fire until I've finished."

"There are optimum firing ranges, Professor, which can't be ignored," said Ingersoll sternly. "Before you do that, you must inform the anti-aircraft battery operators, who will tell you how much time you have to do so, if any." Harry nodded his acknowledgment, and gestured to McGonagall that he was finished.

"Now, continuing... Professor Smith is functioning as the liaison with the member of the Special Forces who is supplying us with various items of Muggle technology, which of course will function while Hogwarts' magic does not. Professor Smith, would you fill us in on that, please?"

John glanced around the table before speaking. "First of all, we have been provided with several cell phones, which for those of you who don't know, are currently the most common way for Muggles to speak to each other when not in person. Phones will be given to the six who can do magic, Professor McGonagall, Mr. Shacklebolt, and Mr. Macmillan, whose responsibility it will be to organize the movement of students if necessary. The number of each phone has been set up in all others on speed-dial; I'll meet later with those getting phones to explain how that works.

"As we speak, I'm told, monitoring cameras are being set up at the Hogwarts gate, near the lake, and at a few locations in Hogsmeade. This is to get advance notice of an attack in the highly unlikely event of something getting by the Special Forces groups, and as a redundant safety measure. The images will be continuously displayed on the screens of two laptop computers with which we have been provided. Student volunteers will monitor these images twenty-four

hours a day, in shifts of no more than two hours. Ernie and Padma, it's your job to recruit the volunteers and schedule their shifts." Harry was pleased to see that Ernie did not seem to be acting self-importantly, instead appearing grave and thoughtful. Now he gets to do Head Boy stuff, thought Harry. Harry hadn't been told, but understood that Padma was there because Hermione was too busy with magic-related responsibilities to function as Head Girl, as was Pansy, so Padma was temporarily Head Girl. Harry wondered if Hannah had been asked and declined, preferring to watch the phoenixes.

"The cell phones are for people to keep in contact, but not in urgent situations, as there can be a delay of five seconds or more in establishing contact when using them. The six who can do magic will also be given pagers, which will only go off if an enemy is sighted by a Special Forces group leader. So, for example, if Harry's pager goes off, he'll look at the pager, know from which group leader it came, and Apparate there immediately. Those given cell phones and pagers will wear them around their necks at all times, on straps." McGonagall looked very unhappy at the idea of wearing Muggle technology around her neck, but said nothing.

"Thank you, Professor Smith," said McGonagall. "Professors Sprout and Hagrid, if you would give us an update on the status of the lutas, and how soon we may hope to have magic back?"

Sprout and Hagrid exchanged uncertain looks. "It's jus' impossible ter know, or even guess," said Hagrid, shaking his head. "We don' know exactly how fas' they're eatin', or how many they have ter eat before the magic comes back. Sorry, but there's jus' too much we don' know. The best guess yer goin' ter get is whatever Fawkes tells Harry."

Sprout nodded in agreement. "We can't even say for certain how many plants there are, though we have a good idea now, based on the places I've seen the phoenixes feeding. The lutas' effect on magic is so rare that we have no idea how many it will take to be removed before magic is restored. By the way, I should say that I would like the phoenixes not to eat every last plant; it would be good to keep a few around."

McGonagall looked unsympathetic. "I understand why, from the point of view of a Herbology professor, but I will not consider even having Professor Potter discuss it with Fawkes until magic is restored. Now, are there any opinions as to whether there will be another attack, and if so, what type will it be?"

No one spoke for a few seconds. Then Harry said, "On the one hand, Voldemort isn't the type to give up. I mean, he keeps trying to kill me, even though he keeps failing. I'd almost be surprised if he didn't try something else, while our magic is still down. But on the other hand, it had to come as a huge shock to him that the six of us can still do magic. He had to have thought that the hard part would be getting the magic down, then it would be easy. He can't have prepared much beyond what he did, so anything he does now is going to be something he didn't have to plan too far in advance. And besides an air attack, it's hard to see what that could be, since it obviously can't be anything magical."

Snape nodded. "I agree with Professor Potter's analysis. The Dark Lord will know by now that Professor Potter and the others can use magic, so he almost certainly will not try to gather more mercenaries. An air attack is the likeliest attempt at this point. I do not think it likely that he will use bombs, however. From his point of view, the plan with the greatest chance of success is as many small planes as he

can manage, loaded with explosives, making simultaneous suicide runs."

"Why do you think he won't use bombs?" asked Ingersoll, surprised.

"Too easy to get rid of," responded Harry, just having realized it. "I can have Fawkes take me in the air and have us free fall along with the bomb, and Vanish it. They'd have to have more than twenty falling at once for us not to be able to do that."

"I'd like to see that," muttered Ingersoll.

"The Dark Lord will know that Professor Potter can do such a thing, so he will probably not try. I do not know whether he is aware that phoenixes can transport onto moving objects; if he is not, that could be an advantage," concluded Snape.

"Does anyone have anything else to add, or ask?" asked McGonagall. After a short silence, she said, "Very well. I expect, of course, that everyone understands that everything that was just said is to be held in the strictest confidence, not to be repeated to a single person outside this room, even after the crisis is concluded.

"I will now be taking the first years to be Sorted; we will use a park on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, just outside the range of the lutas' effect. All Heads of House will attend, as will all fifth-year prefects. Mr. Weasley and Miss Parkinson will attend as well, for security reasons. That will be all for now."

Two hours later, the six took their usual seats in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, arranged in a circle in the center of the room. "So, what's this one about, Harry?" asked Neville, the last to arrive, as he sat down.

Harry was wearing a small, abashed smile. "I told McGonagall that I needed to discuss battle tactics with you, but there isn't that much to discuss. I think we all know what to do. The fact is, I just wanted us all to be able to talk for a few minutes, spend some time together. I mean, at this time yesterday, we were all on the Hogwarts Express, the rest of you wondering how long I could hold out without going to the bathroom." A few of his friends chuckled at the recent memory.

"Seems like a long time ago," agreed Ron. "So much has happened. How are you doing, Harry? This is kind of hardest for you, you're the one in big demand."

"I don't know, okay, I guess. In some ways, I feel like I'm running on automatic pilot. There's so much to do, to think about." Hermione then had to explain the Muggle reference to the others. "By the way, there's something I need to tell you about. Ginny knows, but I haven't had a chance to tell the rest of you yet." He went on to tell them about his new version of the Imperius Curse, and what he had done to Malfoy. He omitted mention of Snape's involvement.

"I was wondering how you found out," said Hermione. "That sounds pretty amazing. Could you do it to me?" Harry did; he had Hermione knock on the desk five times. Afterwards, her amazement was plain. "Oh, my God... Kingsley was right, people would pay for you to do that... Harry, you have to be careful with this."

"I will, obviously," he said, wondering why she felt it was necessary to caution him. "I don't plan to run around making people do things all the time."

"No, of course not, that's not what I meant," she clarified. "I mean, you shouldn't do it to people who ask you to, for their

own enjoyment. People could get addicted to this, it could feel like a drug. If they had enough of it, then they didn't have it, they might get depressed. I don't know, it's just a guess. All I'm saying is, be careful, and only use it when it's necessary, not for entertainment."

"I hadn't even thought of that," he admitted. "I guess I wouldn't, since I can't have it done to me." At the others' insistence, he did do it once to each of them, and they reluctantly agreed with Hermione that it could be too tempting to have it done often.

"Anyway, it could obviously be useful in some situations," pointed out Harry. "For example, if someone was flying an airplane at Hogwarts under the Imperius Curse, I could get aboard and do this to him, make him fly past Hogwarts and land at the nearest possible place. Or, if we were attacked by a group with an obvious leader, I could do it to him, make him order his men to retreat. That kind of thing.

"But the best thing about this, and it's strange, because this was completely by accident... but this is something I can use against Voldemort. I can now do to him what Albus does to him."

Ron looked puzzled. "How do you know? I mean, just because it had this effect on Malfoy, how can you be sure it will on Voldemort?

"It will. It'll have the same effect on all Death Eaters." Harry hoped that Ron would ask no more questions, but his hope was in vain.

"But how can you know?" repeated Ron.

"I'm sorry, I can't tell you."

"Ah, another Ginny and Hermione thing..." Ron paused, obviously thinking, then put two and two together, as Harry feared he would. "You tried this on Snape? He let you??" He gaped, and Neville and Pansy also looked amazed.

"Look, I'm really sorry, but I just can't talk about it. I wish I could."

Ron shook his head. "Boy, if we ever get to hear about all this, it's going to be really interesting. Okay, I know, you can't talk about it. Well, anyway, I'm glad you can do that, if only so Albus doesn't have to anymore. Are you going to let this be known publicly... oh, I guess so, since the first years saw it. You've been so busy, I heard about it before you got a chance to tell us about it."

"That was Albus, not me; that happened before I knew I could do this. But yes, I'm going to make it public that I have something that can knock Voldemort out, not say exactly what it is," explained Harry. "The public explanation will be that it's for security reasons, which is kind of true, but the fact is that it's related to the new Imperius-type spell, and I don't want that to be public. It wouldn't be considered illegal, since it's not really the Imperius Curse, but I don't want people looking at me nervously. I'm going to take my time to decide whether to make that public or not."

"I can really understand that," said Neville. "But why say anything at all?"

"I want people to know that I can do it, because I want them to know that there's hope, that they can be optimistic," said Harry. "I think it would be good for morale."

"I think so too," said Pansy. "It's good for my morale."

"It's a good idea," said Hermione seriously. "I was talking to a few of the Gryffindor first years after they got back from the Sorting. I'd say their morale is pretty good. After seeing what you showed them in the Pensieve, I think they think it's just a matter of time before you defeat Voldemort. That's the attitude we want them to have."

"Oh, yeah, I missed the Sorting," said Ginny, who had been left behind as a means of communication: since McGonagall had Harry with her, she wanted Ginny at Hogwarts. "How did it go?"

"Pretty unusual, to say the least," said Ron. "When we got to the point where the magic worked again, the Hat suddenly said, "'-fflepuff!'", since it had gotten cut off in the middle of the word the first time. McGonagall tried to tell it what had happened, but it didn't seem to care; it just went on as if nothing had changed."

"As one of the few representatives from Slytherin there," added Pansy, "it was hard not to notice that most of the ones that got Sorted into Gryffindor were, let's say, unusually excited. And, a few that were put into other Houses looked kind of disappointed."

"I don't know, Slytherin seemed a little popular," Ron teased her.

"I felt kind of bad about that," said Harry. "I mean, I don't think Gryffindor is better than any other House, they should be happy wherever they go."

"They will be, they'll realize that wherever they went is pretty good," said Hermione. "But it's understandable; this was a very unusual year. Still, in future years—yes, I know, if you stay—Gryffindor will continue to be pretty popular, just not quite the same as this year, when they all got a chance

to spend time with you before they knew which House they were going into. It just won't be like this."

Embarrassed, Harry looked down and thought for a few seconds, then looked up to see his friends' amused faces. Surprised at their silence, he asked, "Is there some reason why you're all not massively teasing me? It just seems like so obvious a chance."

"That's just it, Harry, it's too obvious," said a grinning Ron. "The situation itself teases you. We don't really need to add anything."

"It would just be too much," added Pansy.

Even when they don't tease me, they manage to tease me, thought Harry. "I see. Well, if the situation is done teasing me..." He managed to change the topic, and they talked for another twenty minutes before stopping so they could get on with their other duties.

Harry's next duty was to have an interview with Hugo, who already knew most of what had happened, but wanted Harry's versions for the article. "As long as there are no pictures of me," Harry joked. After they had covered the events of the past twenty-four hours, Hugo put down his notebook. "Can you tell me, Harry, not for publication, how you know it'll work on Voldemort just because it worked on Malfoy?"

"Sorry, Hugo, I can't. I just had to tell Ron the same thing a half hour ago."

"I understand, just thought I'd try. Kingsley wouldn't tell me either. I admit I have a few guesses, but I won't make you listen to them."

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Hugo, I appreciate that."

"No problem. Before we finish, I wanted to know if you'd like to do a little... tying up loose ends, so to speak, journalistically." Taking in Harry's blank expression, Hugo smiled. "Sorry, I should be more clear. A few things have happened since you were last interviewed for an article, and I should see if you want to give a reaction to them; of course, you don't have to.

"For example, that Skeeter article about your childhood. You weren't interviewed for that, which was a breach of journalistic ethics, and the Prophet is responsible for that. Skeeter should have offered you a chance to comment, and if you had said no, said in the article that you didn't comment for it. People would have understood the article differently if they'd known you didn't cooperate with it. So, I'll ask you a question, and you can answer it and say basically anything you want. It's your chance to respond if you want, set the record straight."

Harry looked at Hugo suspiciously, only half-kidding. "Did Molly put you up to this?"

Hugo blinked in surprise. "What does Molly have to do with this?"

Feeling a little silly, Harry explained. Chuckling, Hugo said, "It's sweet of her to want to do that, really. I can see why she feels that way. But as for me, I wouldn't encourage her, because I know probably better than most people how hard it was for you with your aunt and uncle. Even the first time I interviewed you, when they came up, your whole mood changed, even though you were trying to be polite and not react. Then the topic went away, and you were back to normal. I've seen that reaction in enough people to know

what it represents, and I knew it was pretty bad. So, no, I have no agenda in asking, except journalistic ethics."

Harry nodded, sighed, then made a decision. "All right, go ahead."

Hugo picked up his notebook. "Harry, as you know, there was an article in the Prophet last month about your childhood. My understanding is that you were not interviewed for the article, even though you were quoted in it. You should have been given a chance to be interviewed for the article, and the Prophet apologizes for that. Would you like to say anything to correct the record on that matter?"

"Yes, Hugo. I was unhappy with the article, because it gave an impression that I think wasn't accurate. If somebody read that article and thinks they understand what my childhood was like, well, they really don't. I would really have preferred that the article hadn't been written at all. I understand I'm a public person, and can be written about, but it was done in a way that I think wasn't fair."

"Are the quotes from you in the article accurate?"

"Yes, the quotes are accurate, but they were taken out of context from conversations, private conversations, which the reporter overheard because she was an unregistered Animagus. Again, they give an impression which isn't accurate."

"Much was made in the article of the idea that your aunt and uncle dislike wizards. What was your impression of that?"

"My aunt and uncle are Muggles, and just want to live a normal life, the same as most Muggles do. My mother, my aunt's sister, was killed by Voldemort; that's their main

association with the wizarding world. It doesn't seem too surprising to me that they should want to keep their distance from it."

"As you know, that reporter was killed soon thereafter, by an assailant using Polyjuice Potion to take your form. Do you think that was an attempt to discredit you?"

"I imagine partly, and partly as a ruse to get her to open her door, which she probably wouldn't have done if it had been a Death Eater standing there. But, yes, I assume that Death Eaters thought it was a good idea to do that. I was unhappy that they took my form, but of course what was much worse was her death, and that of everyone the Death Eaters kill. They have to be stopped, and we're all trying very hard to do that."

Hugo put down his notebook. "Thanks, Harry."

Harry chuckled wryly. "I think that last sentence was the only thing in all that that wasn't false or misleading. About my aunt and uncle, what I said was literally true, as I'm sure you know, but gave an impression more misleading than Skeeter's article. Maybe there's a future for me as an unethical journalist."

Hugo laughed. "Better stick to fighting evil, Harry. It was nice of you, though. Your intentions were good."

"That was for Molly, not Petunia," said Harry, a little more vehemently than he meant to.

Hugo raised an eyebrow, but nodded. "I can understand that."

"Anyway," Harry went on, "I especially didn't like lying in the sense of giving the impression that Death Eaters killed

Skeeter, since as you know, I know now that's not the case. But I knew you'd understand why I had to say that." As he spoke, he saw Hugo's eyes go very wide. "What?" asked Harry, puzzled. "You had to have known that I was lying."

Hugo smiled a little. "Harry, remember, magic is out at Hogwarts. My abilities may be natural, but they're based in magic. They aren't working right now."

Harry's mouth opened in surprise, then he kicked himself mentally for not having thought of it; he was annoyed at himself for having given away a secret he didn't have to, especially one having to do with Snape. He looked at Hugo unhappily. "Could've told me."

Hugo's first reaction was surprise, then his expression changed rapidly several times; Harry had a hard time understanding why. Finally Hugo stared at Harry, clearly annoyed. Now, Harry was surprised. "What?"

Hugo shook his head. "I'm upset at you, which is a kind of a compliment to you, in a way you may not understand." He paused for a few seconds, then continued, as Harry wondered what he had done. "This goes back to the last time I talked to you, in your room at the Burrow. I was telling you about people's reactions to my ability. One of the things I like about you is that normally, my ability doesn't bother you. You may comment or make jokes about it, but you don't care, which is fairly rare. So, I guess I have higher expectations of you.

"I make my ability public; I specifically mention it to people I'm going to interview as a matter of course. This means that practically everyone who knows me knows I have this ability. I could have hidden it, not told people, like most Legilimens do, but I just thought telling people was the right thing to

do. I still think that; as a journalist, not telling people I can see through them isn't that different from Skeeter listening in on people as a beetle. I don't regret doing it. But as I said last time, it's hard for me personally, both romantically and in a day-to-day way. I don't mean to complain, and usually I don't. But what you said just really hit me the wrong way. My thought was, it's bad enough that I have to go around telling people I have this ability, and now he's saying I should have to tell them when I don't have it? It just seems like that would be a burden on top of a burden. I wasn't trying to deceive you, I just didn't happen to mention it. But even if I deliberately neglected to mention it, I can't imagine that there would be anything wrong with that."

Upset with himself, Harry shook his head. "Obviously, there wouldn't be. I just... felt stupid, I suppose, telling you something I didn't need to. Then it was more stupid to blame you. Anyway, I'm sorry." He chuckled ruefully. "This is exactly what Hermione means when she says I don't think very well sometimes. It just never occurred to me how it might look to you, even though you told me what you did at the Burrow."

Hugo shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Almost no seventeen-year-old would've picked up on it, and many adults wouldn't. And even without my abilities, I get the sense that the question of who killed Skeeter isn't an easy one for you, so you must not have been happy to have to lie about it in your answer. You don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but... does Hermione know who killed Skeeter?"

Harry got the feeling that Hugo was concerned about Hermione. "Yes, but it didn't matter so much by that time. What she went through had more to do with herself, as I'm sure you know."

"Yes, I do. I asked because... you recall that I was there for a few minutes that night, when Skeeter was killed. Most of you were just stunned, surprised, and feeling bad that some little part of you was happy about it, but Hermione... she was in such emotional pain, I felt awful for her. It wasn't in her face, but she was just in turmoil. She seemed okay today, though. Did she get through it all right?"

Harry nodded, pleased that Hugo was so concerned. "Yes, she did, but it wasn't easy. Both she and Neville had really difficult summers, emotionally, but they helped each other, and got through it okay. I think they're both better people for it... but it's a hard way to become a better person."

"You would know about that, wouldn't you," Hugo reminded him. "Well, I should go, there are a few first years I haven't talked to. I'm still not sure I know what they think of you yet."

Harry smiled, knowing that this was Hugo's way of letting him know that everything was okay. "According to Ron, the situation itself teases me, so you don't have to."

"I suppose it does," agreed Hugo. "See you later."

* * * * *

That evening, and the entire next day, passed uneventfully. Harry went back to sleeping in his dormitory, and there were no attacks. There were no classes on Tuesday; McGonagall wanted to resume them, but some students had crisis-related duties, such as watching the video monitors or helping transport the food that came in from the outside three times a day. The loss of magic would also be a problem. Some classes, such as History of Magic and Muggle Studies, required no use of magic, while others, such as Charms and Transfiguration, were almost not worth holding without

it. McGonagall decided Tuesday evening to hold classes on Wednesday, but they would not be formal classes, but rather opportunities for students to ask general questions about the topic, and for teachers to say anything they wanted which wasn't a part of the normal curriculum. Even for classes like History of Magic, she felt, having normal classes wouldn't be fair to those students who were occupied elsewhere.

The phoenixes continued eating, and Ingersoll and his men kept the distance from them that Harry asked them to. To Sprout's surprise and pleasure, shortly after Monday's meeting, the phoenixes stopped eating the lutas near the greenhouse. When asked about it by McGonagall, Harry swore he hadn't talked about it to Fawkes, but reminded her that Fawkes got impressions and images from him as well. Fawkes had no doubt understood what Sprout wanted, and Harry knew he was pleased that some plants would remain. Sprout assured McGonagall that what remained would be nowhere near close enough to interfere with Hogwarts' magic again.

Soon after Harry went to sleep Tuesday night, at least by his reckoning, he was in the phoenix place. "Hi, Albus," he said happily. "I haven't seen you for a few days."

"Yes, you have needed your sleep," said Dumbledore, as they sat down on the grass. "Yet again, it has been a trying few days."

"It sure has," agreed Harry. "But at least one thing happened that wouldn't have without all this, that new spell, I don't know what to call it. Maybe it should be called the Imperius Charm, since it isn't a curse."

"Since you invented it, if you called it that, I'm sure others would as well," said Dumbledore humorously.

"You must be happy that you don't have to do that thing with Voldemort anymore," said Harry.

"I am pleased that you are now able to do it as well, but I may still be called upon to do it myself," pointed out Dumbledore. "There could be circumstances requiring it. What pleases me most is that you can do it without suffering as I do."

"That's why I hope you don't have to do it again," said Harry. "I was--"

"Up, up," said a voice gruffly, and Harry felt himself being yanked from his bed, as the image of the phoenix place disappeared, replaced by one of rapid movement as he found himself standing near his bed, off-balance and confused. He looked around and saw one of the Muggle soldiers holding him by the wrist, and two others with pistols pointed at Dean, Seamus, Ron, and Neville, who were all in their pajamas, as was Harry. Dean and Seamus were frightened, Ron looked angry, and Neville appeared to be thinking.

"What are you doing?" asked Harry indignantly, as the soldier patted him down, obviously looking for his wand, which was under his pillow. "What's going on?"

"C'mon, out," said the soldier. "We're taking you out to the pitch. No talking, let's go."

What in the world is going on? thought Harry. Why are they taking us there? Why are they doing anything at all? Could they be under the Imperius Curse? No, of course not, no magic is working. Then, what? He couldn't imagine what

would cause Ingersoll and his men to do this, they had orders from their Prime Minister.

As they were led out of their dormitory, Harry found himself thinking less about what had happened and more about how to get away. He didn't have his wand, but there was Fawkes. But if he suddenly appeared, the soldiers might start shooting, either him or Fawkes, and he couldn't risk that.

They were led out the portrait hole. One of the three soldiers went first, followed by the five Gryffindors, then the other two soldiers. Harry and Ron were the first two out, and they looked at each other as they waited for the others to come out. Harry mouthed the word 'Fawkes' and glanced upwards; Ron gave him a tiny nod. They walked down the corridor, again with one soldier at the front, two at the rear. Harry communicated to Fawkes that he should appear just after Ron turned the corner, the idea being that the soldiers at the rear wouldn't see, and the one in front wouldn't turn around until it was too late.

The soldier turned the corner, then Harry, then Ron. Right on cue, Fawkes appeared above Harry and Ron. They reached up for the tail, and Fawkes took flight. As the lead soldier turned, Fawkes disappeared.

They were back in their dormitory. Harry and Ron ran to their beds, scrambling for their wands. Ron grabbed his, breathing a sigh of relief. "I feel naked without this thing, hadn't realized it until now. What do you think is going on?"

"I have no idea, but I know how to find out. We're going back, behind the soldiers at the back. Repulsion Charms on."

Ron grunted. "If you'd said 'Repulsion Charms off,' I'd have said, 'up yours, mate.' Damn right, they're on."

Harry nodded. "Just making sure." He didn't like the idea, but he knew that soldiers shouldn't be shooting at people they knew didn't pose a threat to them. Of course, he thought, they shouldn't be rounding people up in the middle of the night either. "Ready?" They grabbed Fawkes's tail, and were again in the corridor they'd turned off from a minute ago. Harry felt his hand tingle, but didn't have time to answer it. It continued to tingle, then she spoke. "Harry! Are you okay?" He looked at his hand as they ran and whispered, "I got away, can't talk now." As they neared the corner, she spoke again. "Thank goodness, Harry. They have us all out at—"

He held up his hand again. "Ginny, please stop talking. I have to concentrate." The last look on her face that he saw before he put his hand down appeared hurt, but he couldn't think about that at the moment.

They turned the corner, and saw the group fifteen feet ahead, soon to turn onto another corridor leading to a main corridor where there might be more people, which Harry didn't want; he wanted to be sure these three soldiers talked to no one else, though he knew they might have radioed ahead about his and Ron's escape. Harry and Ron ran ahead, trying to be as quiet as possible, which made it fortunate that they were in their stocking feet. Harry got to within ten feet of the rear soldiers, and used his new Imperius Charm. The soldiers stopped walking, and stared at the ceiling. The lead soldier was about to turn the corner; Harry ran past the rear soldiers and pointed his wand at the lead one. The soldier stopped walking and turned around, facing an astonished Dean and Seamus. Neville smiled at Ron and Harry. "I knew you'd be back, just didn't think it'd be quite that soon."

Harry nodded at Neville, then turned his attention to the lead soldier. Continuing the spell, he asked, "What's going on? Why are we being rounded up?"

"I don't know, sir," responded the soldier. "Captain Ingersoll's orders. We're to round up all the castle's inhabitants and take them out to the pitch. We don't know any more than that."

"How many more of you will be there?"

"All fifty-four, sir."

"Including the anti-aircraft operators?"

"Yes, sir."

Damn, thought Harry, this means there'll probably be an air attack. "Did you communicate to anyone that Ron and I got away?"

"Yes, sir. Captain Ingersoll said he'd send reinforcements to help search for you."

Harry turned to the two rear soldiers. "You two, point your guns at us. You, radio Captain Ingersoll and tell him you recaptured us," he said to the lead soldier, who proceeded to do so. Harry hoped that Ingersoll would call back the reinforcements; he didn't know how many people he could put under the Charm at once. "Okay, you three continue marching us out there. I'll talk to Ingersoll when we get there."

"Yes, sir," said the soldier, and they resumed their previous formation. As they started forward again, Dean said, "Harry, what the—"

"Don't say anything," Neville interrupted him. "Harry's got it under control. Just pretend they have us, he's taking care of it."

They continued walking, turning the corner and heading towards the castle entrance. It was still dark, with the first signs of light on the horizon, so Harry figured the time to be roughly five o'clock. He remembered the sky looking the same way at this time almost exactly a year ago, when he had been out flying with Ron and Dumbledore. He kept his wand in his right hand, holding it by one end, up his sleeve so as to be as inconspicuous as possible.

As they exited the castle, Harry noticed that there were no phoenixes, at least none that he could see. He thought of asking Fawkes, but then realized the reason himself: the emotional atmosphere was too negative for the phoenixes to be around, what with three hundred people being held captive near where the phoenixes had been eating.

They approached the Quidditch pitch, and could see that almost all the castle's inhabitants were there; glancing behind him, he saw other soldiers leading out the Slytherin seventh year girls and the Hufflepuff seventh year boys. The rest of the soldiers were at the outer edges of the group of students, many of whom looked frightened and anxious.

McGonagall and the teachers were in a group near Ingersoll, looking angry, except Snape, whose demeanor was calm. The lead soldier walked up to Ingersoll. "Was there any trouble recapturing them?" asked Ingersoll.

"No, sir, no problems," replied the soldier. Harry moved his wand as far down into his hand as he could without it being seen, and with a small movement, pointed it at Ingersoll. He mentally instructed Ingersoll to defuse the situation to the

extent possible, imbuing him with the certainty that he had been given false orders, and that his primary duty was to keep the Hogwarts inhabitants safe. Harry knew he couldn't have Ingersoll do anything obvious, such as order his men to drop their weapons; it had to be something that Ingersoll might plausibly do.

Ingersoll had each of the four other squad leaders report to him, then ordered them to take their squads and resume their former positions in Hogsmeade, including the anti-aircraft units. They did so, clearly assuming that Ingersoll and his nine men could handle three hundred unarmed civilians. Ingersoll then ordered his men to a spot near him. From ten feet away, Harry started applying his Imperius Charm to all of them, then took a surprised McGonagall by the arm and walked up to Ingersoll.

"Everyone's taken care of, Captain," said Harry, seeing Snape and motioning him to come forward. "Why were we rounded up?"

"I received new orders from the Defense Minister himself, sir," replied Ingersoll. "We were to round up the castle residents, and take them out here. I was to call for further orders after that was completed."

"This Defense Minister was under the Imperius Curse, no doubt," put in Snape. "Professor, Headmistress, there will be an air attack any time now."

"I know," replied Harry. To Ingersoll, he asked, "How soon will your anti-aircraft people be ready to use them?"

"Another five minutes at least, sir, to reach them and get them ready," said Ingersoll. "I'll contact them, tell them it's imperative to get set up as soon as possible."

As Ingersoll did so, Harry exchanged glances with McGonagall and Snape, both of whom seemed to have worked out what Harry had done with Ingersoll. Harry saw Ginny, Hermione, and Pansy edge their way to the front. "Well, we'd just better hope that nothing happens in the next five minutes," said Harry. Just then, he heard shouts from a few students, and saw a few pointing to the sky. In the darkness, he could barely see the lights of an airplane. "Damn," he said, then to the others, "I'll be right back," as Fawkes appeared. Fawkes took off, and the next thing Harry knew, they were in the air, inside the plane.

It was a small plane, with some boxes where there would normally be passengers; Harry immediately assumed that there were explosives in the boxes. He moved toward the cockpit, where the pilot was picking up a gun. He waved his wand, and the man put down the gun, turned, and looked at Harry. "Are these boxes yours?" asked Harry.

"No, they were put on the plane by the people who sent me out," replied the pilot.

Harry immediately Vanished the boxes, and the gun. "You should land at the nearest possible place," said Harry.

"I will," agreed the pilot. Harry nodded, grabbed Fawkes, and was back at the Quidditch pitch. Fawkes set him down.

"Professor," said Snape, and pointed at a different section of the sky. Harry saw more lights, closer this time. Harry grabbed Fawkes's tail again, and again they were inside a small plane.

This time, however, they were too late. The pilot lay slumped over in his chair; Harry could smell something he had never smelled before, but knew it had to be from a very recently

fired gun. He quickly turned and Vanished four boxes, then was back on the ground.

"The pilot is dead," reported Harry to Snape, McGonagall, and Ingersoll. He realized he need not report that the plane was descending sharply towards them, as that was obvious. To Ingersoll, he asked, "Can you fly a plane?"

"Some kinds, but there's no time," said Ingersoll urgently. "That thing's less than thirty seconds away."

Students were starting to run, but Harry knew there was no point to it, as there was no telling exactly where the plane would hit. "Grab onto me," Harry instructed Ingersoll, who did. Harry put an arm around Ingersoll, grabbed Fawkes's tail, and they were on the airplane.

Harry pointed his wand at the cockpit, and the dead pilot flew out of the seat; Harry placed him on the floor behind them as Ingersoll quickly sat in the pilot's seat. The ground was getting closer and closer as Ingersoll struggled with the controls. Looking out the front window, Harry saw that the plane was headed right for the people on the ground, many of whom were now trying to run away from the pitch. Harry put a hand on Ingersoll's shoulder, ready to Disapparate them out at the last second before the plane crashed. He couldn't use Fawkes to get them out because Ingersoll was sitting, in no easy position to be carried, but Harry also knew he couldn't Apparate from there directly to the ground.

When they were so close to the ground that Harry was sure they were going to fail, Ingersoll shouted, "Got it!" The plane slowed its descent and started to level out. Harry saw that it would miss the ground, but plow into the Quidditch stands, and knew they couldn't be around for that. Harry grabbed

Ingersoll firmly by the collar, and at the last second before the plane hit the Quidditch stands, Disapparated.

They were in the air, free-falling. Harry had decided to Apparate two thousand feet off the ground; he wasn't sure how fast they would hit the ground, and wanted to leave plenty of leeway. Fawkes materialized beside him and started falling. Harry grabbed Fawkes's tail, and Fawkes slowly started to fly, gradually decelerating so Harry could get used to Ingersoll's weight. When Harry was carrying almost all of Ingersoll's weight, Fawkes disappeared, and appeared three feet off the ground, on the Quidditch pitch. Harry set Ingersoll down, then Fawkes glided down further, so Harry could release him and land.

McGonagall stepped up to them. "Professor Potter, Captain Ingersoll... well done."

Thirty minutes later, there was a meeting in the staff room, attended by McGonagall, Bright, Snape, Kingsley, Harry, and Ingersoll. Bright had been roused out of bed by Aurors, and on his arrival at Hogwarts, privately given details by McGonagall about what had happened. Harry had kept Ingersoll under the Imperius Charm since the plane crashed, having him communicate to his group leaders that the orders he had received were not valid, and to resume their previous activities.

McGonagall spoke first. "Professor Potter, if you would now lift your spell..."

Harry did so, and Ingersoll blinked, then looked around, finally settling on Harry. "You did that to me?" he asked in astonishment.

Harry nodded. "I didn't have much choice. If I hadn't, we'd all be dead... including you, by the way. I'd bet the

explosives on those planes would have taken out more than the entire pitch. Voldemort really doesn't care who he kills."

Ingersoll stared at Harry, then looked at the others again. "Have you confirmed that the Defense Minister's orders were coerced?"

Kingsley looked at Ingersoll gravely. "The Defense Minister is dead. I Apparated to his office to talk to him, I found the body. It appears clear that a Death Eater got to the Minister, put him under the Imperius Curse to issue the desired orders, and killed him when he had no more use."

Ingersoll looked stunned. "I guess we can safely assume that the orders weren't valid. But what do we do, then? Have them give me orders and tell me that no further orders I get are valid unless they are given in person? And how would I know that whoever did that wasn't under the same spell that he put me under?"

Bright spoke. "You can believe this or not, Captain, and I would understand if you didn't, but law-abiding members of the magical community use such spells only when their use is absolutely necessary. Nobody who gave you orders would be under duress from us. But it appears safe to say that we made a mistake in asking you to assist us, as we involved you in situations you could not be prepared for. We are so used to the forces of Dark magic leaving the non-magical community alone that we failed to consider the steps they might take once we ourselves involved you. In any case, this does not concern you personally, but I will be speaking to the Prime Minister as soon as possible and, for your safety more than ours, requesting that you and your officers be removed. No insult to you is intended; you have performed your jobs admirably, and you personally saved many lives, with Professor Potter's assistance."

Ingersoll shook his head. "After I endangered them. Yes, I had orders I had reason to think were valid, but I did think they were strange, and I should have tried to get confirmation. It's just that in the military we don't think to question orders unless they're obviously immoral or illegal, and this was borderline. You are all magical, so it's not inconceivable that you could be a threat. Anyway, you could be right, we may be in over our heads here. After what just happened, what almost happened, it would be hard to argue with you. All I can tell you for now is that I'll just flat-out disobey any orders I get that seem hostile to you people."

"Thank you, Captain," said Bright. "We know that's not an easy thing for a member of the armed forces to say. Well, if you would excuse us, there are magic-related matters the five of us need to discuss. You may want to make whatever preparations are necessary for your departure. You do not yet have orders, of course, but I suspect you will be getting them at some point today. I do not want to endanger you, or anyone in your chain of command, who may be vulnerable to another such attack."

"I understand," said Ingersoll. "I'll tell my men to get ready. I'll be at my usual post if you need me in the meantime." Nodding to them, he stood and left.

After he was gone for a few seconds, Bright spoke again. "I assume everyone agrees that it's better if they leave?"

"They have to leave, even if it wasn't a safety issue," said Harry. "Fawkes has let me know that after what just happened, the phoenixes won't come back here until the Muggles are gone. Not that they think the Muggles are evil, exactly, but that they can be made to do bad or dangerous things. Fawkes is sure that once they're gone, the phoenixes will come back."

"I can't blame them," remarked Kingsley.

"Indeed," agreed Bright. "Well, that would appear to settle that matter. I will put in an urgent call to the Prime Minister as soon as we are done here. Now, Harry, do you think that you and your friends will be able to handle the defense of the castle by yourselves?"

"Don't really have much choice, do we?" pointed out Harry. "But yeah, we can do it. The electronic equipment the Muggles gave us will be a big help."

"Yes, it will," said McGonagall. "It should reduce the burden on you six by quite a bit. I will have to think about it, but I may not have you do Hogsmeade patrols at all. Hogsmeade residents have indicated a willingness to do patrols of their own; they accepted having the Muggles here, but did not particularly like it. After what just happened, they would probably demand their removal as well. I can give them a few of our cell phones, and they can call if they see anything suspicious." With distaste, she added, "I would be happy to let them have mine."

"What will we do about air defense?" asked Harry.

McGonagall looked at Kingsley. "I think we can get patrols going," Kingsley suggested. "We would need to find out just how high in the air the magic-prevention effect goes, but once we know that, we can put people up there on brooms, even at altitudes like a few thousand feet. They would patrol around the area, keep an eye out for planes or anything suspicious. It could be six people at a time, one Auror and five Ministry volunteers. If they see anything, they'd contact me, then I'd contact Harry on the cell phone."

"That sounds excellent, Kingsley, thank you," said McGonagall. "If you can get started on those arrangements

soon, perhaps they will be ready by the time the Muggles leave." As McGonagall was speaking, Harry felt his hand tingle, then Ginny's voice, saying, "I know you're busy, but if you could come to your office when you're done, I'll be waiting for you there." He wanted to respond and say he would, but he knew he couldn't.

"I'll head back and get started on it right away," said Kingsley. "One thing before I leave... we, by which I mean the Aurors, are going to monitor all incoming communication to Captain Ingersoll." Harry raised his eyebrows; he didn't know they could do that. I guess there are still a lot of things that can be done by magic that I don't know about, he thought. "I believe him when he says he'll refuse orders that are hostile to you, but he could be ordered to do something that he doesn't realize is hostile. It's better to be safe." Kingsley stood and left. Harry wondered for a second how Kingsley was going to get back to the Aurors' facility, then he remembered that one of his friends could escort Kingsley.

"I should be going as well," said Bright. "It is late enough that I should be able to contact the Prime Minister; he may be awake already, having been told of the death of the Defense Minister. I will impress upon him that time is of the essence in removing his troops. Professor Potter, would you escort me to my office?"

"Of course, sir, but I wanted to ask something while you were still here. I wondered... how many people saw me use my new spell--and by the way, I've decided to call it the Imperius Charm--and recognized what it was? Or will they think I used the Imperius Curse? Should we do anything about that?"

"You may have to let it be known publicly," said McGonagall. "Enough people saw, and by now will have told others, that

it would be difficult to keep secret. In addition, people will assume that you used the Imperius Curse. While the cause was sufficient for you to have done so, I would rather they knew you had not done that. So, you should feel free to reveal it to anyone who asks."

"I guess that makes sense," he agreed. "I mean, I'd rather not have people worried that I'll do this to them, but hopefully they'll understand that it'd only be used in dire situations."

"I think people's regard for you is such that they would understand that without having to be told," said Bright reassuringly.

"Thank you, Minister," said Harry. "I'll get you back to the Ministry now, then." He did, and was back very quickly; it was now just him, McGonagall, and Snape. He turned to Snape and said, "Well, you were right about the suicide runs. What else do you think he'll try, at this point?"

Snape thought. "Considering that he has no magical means at his disposal, it is difficult to imagine what he could do now that he has not yet done. If I had to speculate, I would guess that he will now decide that his best efforts have failed in this situation, and work on new ways to eliminate you."

Harry was surprised. "You mean, you think this whole attack was just to get me?"

"Not originally, obviously, since when he had Malfoy spread the seeds he had no idea of the threat that you would come to be. But now, I strongly suspect that he saw this attack primarily as a way to get rid of you. He will be highly frustrated that he has failed yet again."

Harry smiled. "Thank you, Professor, I appreciate your making the effort to lift my spirits like that." Annoyed, Snape gave him a very disapproving look. "Actually, that reminds me of something I wanted to ask. The fact that he keeps failing, and now I can knock him out... is that going to start making him look bad to the Death Eaters? Like he's lost power, or maybe they'll think they shouldn't have joined him?"

"Not that exactly, but yes, I believe it will cost him some standing with them, if only in the sense that they will no longer view him as the greatest power in the magical world," agreed Snape. "No one will say so to his face, of course, nor will they speak of it among themselves. They will prefer not to even think it, because they know he has access to their memories. But it will be there in the background, unmentionable yet unavoidable. It will tend to depress their morale."

Harry talked with them for another ten minutes, then Apparated to his office to find Ginny sitting in his chair. She leaped up, hugged him fiercely, kissed him, then hugged him again, holding on. "Oh, Harry..." She didn't say more, but he knew what she meant.

"It's over," he said, one arm around her shoulders, a hand holding the back of her head.

She shook her head. "It'll never be over. Not until he's gone."

He couldn't deny that. "Well, for now, at least, anyway. Snape thinks he's done all he can. I hope he's right." She finally released him, and they sat.

"I was really scared, when they took us out there," she said, fear from the memory clear in her eyes. "I thought they were

going to kill us. A lot of us did. I was so glad when you said you'd gotten away, I knew we were going to be all right."

He recalled something that he hadn't thought about since it happened. "I'm sorry I had to cut you off, when you were talking to me—"

"No, that was my fault," she said apologetically. "When you said you couldn't talk, I should have understood it meant you couldn't listen either, you had to focus on what you were doing. I just couldn't help it, I was so anxious, and so happy that you'd escaped. I know I need to keep that in mind for the future. But just standing out there, without our wands... I wanted to tell people that you'd escaped, so they'd feel better, but I knew I couldn't take a chance on the soldiers finding out, making it harder for you. It's funny, I got a little feeling of what it's like to be you. Since I'm one of 'the six,' which I think people are starting to call us, a few first and second years came up to me, even more scared than I was, asking if there wasn't something I could do. All I could do was shake my head and say I didn't have my wand, just like them. They just wanted to know that there was some hope. I guess people look to you for that a lot." She smiled, and added, "Including me, I suppose."

"I'll always do my best, for you," he assured her, taking her hand. "Thank goodness for Fawkes, I couldn't have done any of that without him. Funny how I get credit for a lot of stuff he does."

"You get credit because he chose you, and that's really rare," she pointed out.

He nodded, and was silent for a moment. Then he said, "It's interesting... I never worried about the soldiers killing us, because I'm Muggle-born. I know that even if they'd been

ordered to kill us, they wouldn't have done it. Voldemort would have made their Defense Minister order Ingersoll to kill us if he could have, but I'm sure that the Minister would have told Voldemort, or whoever did it, that Ingersoll wouldn't follow that order. Not being familiar with how the Muggle military works, wizards wouldn't know that. I can see why you were scared."

"It was like a nightmare, being dragged out of bed like that," she said, shuddering. "I feel like I want to go to sleep with my wand in my hand from now on."

"At least until the magic comes back, and nobody can get into Gryffindor Tower without the password," he agreed. "It must be really hard for everyone but the six of us, who can't do magic. They must feel pretty helpless."

She nodded. "And they need us to protect them, while this goes on. It's hard to get used to that, that people would look at me like that, even if only for a few days. I feel like, 'I'm nothing special, what do you expect me to do?'"

He gave her a slightly teasing smile. "And if people started going on about how great you were, you might get embarrassed, don't you think?"

"Maybe a little," she admitted. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to stop teasing you about it."

"Well, obviously, I would never expect that," he joked. He started to say something else, but was interrupted by a knock on the door. "It's me," he heard Hermione say. He opened the door with his wand.

"I'm sorry, I can see why you two would want to be alone," said Hermione sympathetically. "All I wanted to do after this happened was be alone with Neville, have him hold me."

"It's all right, we've done our holding," Harry assured her as he conjured a third chair. "Sit down, I want to tell you something Snape-related while I have you two alone." He proceeded to tell them about the events of Sunday evening that he hadn't told the whole group, including the memory of Snape's he was shown. They gasped when Harry told them about Snape's 'practicing,' and tears came to Hermione's eyes. "Oh, it's so terrible... for all of them..."

Harry nodded. To Ginny, he said, "That's why McGonagall wasn't worried about what you were. She knew I would suffer, because she had, and that as long as I suffered, it wasn't immoral. I was doing it for a greater cause, and so was she, when she did it."

Ginny shook her head. "I could never have imagined something like that... but there's something I'm wondering about, from that memory. You said Snape suggested that test, but it seemed like Voldemort knew about it already. Why didn't Voldemort just demand that Snape take the test, instead of waiting for Snape to suggest it?"

"Part of Voldemort's standard cruelty, I suppose. This comes across when you see it, but not when I tell you about it... Voldemort knew how horrible it would be for Snape, of course, and Voldemort got off on making Snape be the one to suggest it. You could see it in his face, in his smile. He was enjoying the anticipation, the fear he knew Snape would have at the idea. He would have preferred that Snape begged him not to do it; I got the impression that he was a little disappointed at how brave Snape was being. He likes to see people in fear, squirming."

They were all silent, overwhelmed by the idea that someone could enjoy such a thing. Then Hermione asked, "Speaking of fear and squirming, that reminds me of something I've

wondered about since I found out about the Cleansing. You said that Death Eaters always have the Cleansing done. But Pettigrew obviously hadn't had it done, had he? He didn't act like it, at least, when we saw him."

"I don't know for a fact, but I'm pretty sure he hadn't," said Harry. "Not at that point, anyway. At the time he betrayed my parents, Pettigrew couldn't have had it done, because he was Voldemort's spy, and the Cleansing would have caused such a change in his behavior that it would have been noticed. So, at the time Voldemort came back, it still hadn't been done. As for now, I have no idea, but I'd guess Voldemort had done it to him. There'd be no reason not to, for Voldemort, and he always would have to worry about Pettigrew betraying him, feeling guilty for having helped kill my parents. Pettigrew doesn't exactly have the personality of a killer; the main thing we saw of him was fear. He could still have fear after the Cleansing."

"Snape doesn't seem to have much, if any, fear," suggested Ginny. "I mean, look at what he did."

"It was extremely brave," agreed Harry. "But he has fear, he just doesn't show it. I could feel it in the memory, and in one of the other memories he showed me before. But what he really fears... and he's never told me this exactly, I'm not sure how I know, but I know... he truly fears the idea of carrying on like he does without a purpose. Like, if he got exposed, and couldn't be a spy anymore. What would he do? Carry this huge burden, for no good reason? Now, he has a motivation to do what he does, a very important and valuable purpose. For that, he can endure what he endures, which is really hard even with my help. But could he do it if the purpose was just to stay alive, or be a viable member of the Hogwarts staff, or society in general? That would be really hard."

"But what's he going to do after Voldemort is defeated?" asked Ginny. Harry noted that she said it as though it were a certainty, an accidental or deliberate statement of her faith in him.

"I don't think he knows, and I don't think he cares. I think if I asked him that question, he'd say, 'I will think about that after the Dark Lord is defeated.'"

"You know what the really sad thing is," said Hermione. "When Voldemort is defeated, we'll be happy, celebrating, helping Harry avoid being made Minister of Magic." She smiled, as did Ginny. "Sorry, couldn't resist slipping that in. But anyway, he won't even be able to be happy, or relieved. He's done so much, suffered so much, to see that happen, but all he'll get is a sense of satisfaction, maybe Schadenfreude at Voldemort's expense."

Harry nodded somberly. "I think that'll be enough for him. I do wish there was some way to undo what was done to him. I just don't think there is."

After a pause, Hermione spoke, looking at Harry. "Anyway, the reason I came here was to suggest that you go be with people. Maybe go to the Great Hall. A lot of people are hanging around there, waiting for breakfast, not wanting to go outside where the soldiers are. You could talk to them, explain what happened."

"McGonagall said she was going to do that, she's probably doing it right now," said Harry. "But yes, I suppose people will want to ask me questions. Okay, let's go." He got another hug and kiss from Ginny before they left.

They arrived at the Great Hall in time to hear the end of McGonagall's speech, which was heard by most students. After McGonagall finished, Harry was surrounded and asked

questions. He found that there was a lot of resentment against the Muggle troops, even though the students understood that Ingersoll had thought he was following legitimate orders. "There's something about getting pulled out of bed at five a.m. and having a gun pointed at you that makes it hard to be understanding of it," said a Hufflepuff fifth year prefect.

"Of course, Beth, I know what you mean," agreed Harry. "But you have to keep in mind that he did save all our lives. Fawkes and I got him up there, but he was able to get enough control of the plane at the last second that it didn't kill a couple hundred people on the ground."

"But, Harry, that was—oops, sorry, Professor," she interrupted herself as most of the hundred or so people in hearing range chuckled.

"We're not in class, 'Harry' is fine," he assured her.

"Well, anyway, that was only because you'd put him under that new spell of yours," she protested. "He probably wouldn't have done it if you hadn't." This prompted several people to talk at once, offering opinions to anyone nearby.

"I think he would've, but I agree we can't know for sure," said Harry. "I am sure that if he hadn't been given false orders from his superiors, he definitely would have. Muggle military people are trained to do things like that."

Harry heard some doubtful-sounding noises. "How is it that it just so happens he can fly a plane, anyway?" asked Terry Boot. "I thought he wasn't in the Muggle air forces."

"They're Special Forces," explained Colin Creevey. "They're like the elite Muggle military forces, they get sent on all

kinds of unusual and dangerous missions. They get trained in everything."

"That's true," agreed Justin, "but why were they sent anyway? Why not ordinary Army troops? All they had to do was fight mercenaries, who couldn't have been very well trained."

"Well, the Prime Minister seemed pretty keen to cooperate," related Harry. "He was strict with Ingersoll about ordering him and his men to keep away from the phoenixes. I guess he wanted to send the best they had. And it was a good thing they did, because most Army officers wouldn't have known how to fly a plane, I'd guess."

"Oh, something I was wondering about, Harry," said Ron. "Sorry, I mean, Professor," he added, getting a big laugh.

"You call me 'Professor' in class, and you'll get detention," retorted Harry, to further laughter, including Ron's.

"Anyway," said Ron, "when you had those soldiers under that spell, they kept calling you 'sir.' Why?"

Harry chuckled, embarrassed. "That was something I did on the spur of the moment. I don't know if it was necessary or not, but I decided to have them view me as a superior officer. Since they're military, I thought it might make more sense to them to be following my orders if they thought that."

"But you didn't specifically make them call you 'sir,'" clarified Ron.

"No, of course not, I was a little too busy to think of things like that. It wasn't as though I was controlling them like puppets. I just gave them the impression that it was

important to follow my orders, and to ensure the safety of everyone at Hogwarts."

Just then, a phoenix burst into view and flew around the Great Hall. Everyone watched it, including Harry and those nearby. "Is that Fawkes?" asked Ron.

"No," replied Harry, confused. "I'd be getting an impression from him if it was." The phoenix flew for another half a minute, then to Harry's surprise, fluttered down and settled on his shoulder.

The others nearby reacted with great surprise. "Wow, Harry, you've been chosen by another phoenix!" said Ron, who Harry thought wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

"You can't be chosen by more than one phoenix," said Hannah, who looked like she was resisting the impulse to walk over to Harry and pet the phoenix. "Harry, you should ask Fawkes what's going on."

Harry did, and reported the answer to the others in less than a minute. "He says she's curious about humans, and just landed on me because she recognizes that I'm a phoenix companion, so I would know how to deal with them, be comfortable with them. Apparently, she's one of the ones who's never bonded with a human before, so staying near me is kind of her way of feeling comfortable."

"That's interesting," remarked Hermione. "I guess it makes sense. After all, a lot of us went out there to watch them when they were eating. They should be able to come in here and watch us if they want to. Boy, she's really pretty, even prettier than Fawkes." She glanced at Harry, suddenly concerned. "No offense to Fawkes, I hope he knows."

Harry laughed. "He wouldn't care... I'm getting something from him... he thinks what you said is funny, too. He agrees with you, he thinks female phoenixes are more attractive than male ones. Of course, he would think that."

They talked about phoenixes a little more, then got back to the topic of the morning's events. Even though the students had been told what happened by McGonagall, those around Harry wanted to hear his version of events, so he dutifully told the story as he had seen it. Those nearby who were Muggle-born agreed with Harry's assessment that they had been in no direct danger from the troops, which the others found hard to believe. They discussed that for a while, then the subject changed to Harry's new spell. Most everyone agreed that the Imperius Charm was a good name. Harry described how he did it, and Hermione described how it felt, and why she felt that he shouldn't do it unless absolutely necessary. Even so, some people asked him to do it to them, but didn't argue when he demurred.

The female phoenix stayed for less than a half hour, then took flight and disappeared, to the regret of the students. After spending the better part of an hour talking to the other students, Harry went outside to talk to Ingersoll. He found him talking to one of his officers, and waited until he was finished to approach him. "Captain," he greeted him.

"Professor," responded Ingersoll politely. "Soon after I left that meeting, I talked to the Prime Minister briefly. He confirmed that the Defense Minister should have given no such orders, and is now dead. Last I heard, he's now talking to your Minister of Magic, so I expect we'll be getting our orders any time now."

Harry remembered Ingersoll's earlier comment that he had endangered the Hogwarts residents. "You know, what

happened wasn't your fault. We should've guessed that might happen, it's not the kind of thing that you could know."

"It's good of you to say that, considering what almost happened," said Ingersoll. "I must say, I have a somewhat greater appreciation of your abilities, after that. And whatever you did to us, it felt awfully good. I heard some of my men joking about it, saying, 'Any chance we can get that kid out here and do it again?'" Harry chuckled as Ingersoll continued, "They were kidding, but I'm sure they wouldn't have minded. I know how they felt."

Harry found himself wishing he could experience the spell himself. "I also wanted to thank you for what you did in the plane. Without that, quite a few people would have died. There was nothing magical that I could do at that point."

"I'm just amazed that I could feel that good, and yet focus when I had to," said Ingersoll. He looked at Harry quizzically, as if having had a sudden thought. "Look, let me ask you... they told us that when we were finished with this assignment, our memories of it would be erased. I doubted it at first, but now I can definitely believe it. That's probably going to happen soon, maybe in the next two hours. So, why are you out here talking to me, telling me stuff I'm not going to remember? Why bother?"

Harry hadn't thought of it that way. "I'll remember. I don't know, it just wouldn't have occurred to me to act like you don't matter just because you're not going to remember this. I'm not sure I can give a better answer than that."

Ingersoll nodded. "I guess I can understand that. In that case, let me ask you another question, the answer to which I

won't remember. Why don't you people just take over? Lord knows, you could, it wouldn't be that hard."

Harry grinned ruefully. "It's too bad you didn't ask someone who paid more attention in History of Magic. I have a vague recollection that it has happened before, mostly with wizards being advisers, the power behind kings and queens. All I know for sure is that wizards dread the idea of being known by Muggles, which is why your memories are getting taken away. I think the idea is that once the information got out, it would be very hard to undo, and wizards would get a lot of unwanted attention. People would be jealous of what we can do, and afraid of us. There may be more to it than that, but that's all I know, really."

"Sounds reasonable," said Ingersoll thoughtfully. "Although I am surprised that even one person hasn't tried it before, and gotten your world exposed that way."

"Me too, come to think of it," agreed Harry. "I'm sure someone has, and they probably just fixed it with Memory Charms. But I'd bet that was before they had television; it would be a lot harder to fix now."

After a pause, Ingersoll said with mild embarrassment, "Okay, another question... for a guy who's about to have his memories wiped, I'm awfully inquisitive, but as long as you're willing to answer... how many times have you been in combat, or whatever is your equivalent of combat?"

Harry thought. "Depends on what you count, but at least a half-dozen times."

Ingersoll nodded. "I thought as much. You have this look, very unusual for someone so young. You get a different outlook when you've looked death in the face, and I can tell

that you have, more than once. You're what, seventeen? How did that happen?"

Chuckling, Harry said, "If I tried to tell you the whole story, I wouldn't be finished by the time they gave you the Memory Charm. I'll just try to cover the highlights." He took the next half hour telling Ingersoll about Voldemort and his history with him, though he had to stop a few times as Ingersoll fielded questions from his men.

After Harry finished, Ingersoll shook his head. "Amazing. Only seventeen, but you've really been through the wars. And it sounds like you're not done yet."

"Unfortunately, no," agreed Harry.

"Why doesn't Voldemort do more than he does, though, especially to Muggles? Here I am, using your word... anyway, why would he care about keeping your world secret?"

"I think I know this one. He's afraid that Muggles would help us fight him. Not directly, but they could report sightings, that sort of thing, just make his life harder. He likes to do things behind the scenes, pull strings."

"But, you're saying they—" Ingersoll cut himself off as his cell phone rang. "Ingersoll," he said. As he listened, his eyes went wide.

As Harry wondered what was wrong, his own cell phone rang. "Yes?"

"Harry, Kingsley. Ingersoll just got a call—"

"I know, I'm with him. What is it?"

"It's from a Death Eater, they're telling him to shoot you or one of the others, or they'll find him and kill him once the Memory Charm's been done to him. You have to put him under the Imperius Charm, make sure he stays on the line. We're tracing the call now." With magic, not technology, Harry assumed.

Ingersoll was saying little to the caller, looking serious but not panicked. Harry decided not to put Ingersoll under the Charm until there was a compelling reason; instead, he waved his wand, and the words 'keep him talking' appeared in the air. Ingersoll raised his eyebrows at the method of communication, but nodded his agreement.

"Okay, we have it," said Kingsley. "Sending a team out."

Harry watched Ingersoll finish asking the caller a question, then listen. A few seconds later, Ingersoll closed the phone. "He stopped talking rather abruptly, so I assume they got him. You were monitoring my calls?"

"The Aurors were; I didn't know they could do that," said Harry.

Ingersoll nodded. "A reasonable precaution, given the situation. I assume you know that there was no way—"

"I know," Harry interrupted Ingersoll. "Kingsley told me to do that spell I did on you before, but I could tell it wasn't necessary. I think he knew that you wouldn't, but he just wanted me to be careful. Being Muggle-raised, I knew there wasn't any chance you would do what they asked you to do."

"I'm surprised the one who called didn't know," commented Ingersoll. "What did he think, I was just going to walk up and shoot you or the others?"

"They have a different attitude about killing, as you may have worked out from what I told you," Harry explained. "They assume you would kill to save yourself, because they would."

"So, can they do what they threatened?" asked Ingersoll; Harry felt that Ingersoll wasn't overly worried, but was taking the threat seriously.

"Not if we give you protection, no," said Harry. "The Aurors will give you magic-detection jewelry, like my cousin Dudley has. If anyone magical gets anywhere near you, Aurors will be there before anything can happen. The people that threatened you know that, but they knew you wouldn't."

"They must be desperate, to try something like that," said Ingersoll.

"They must have thought, why not, one last try before you left," said Harry. "They would have thought it wouldn't hurt to try; I'm sure they had no idea we could track them."

Ingersoll's phone rang again; he answered it, spoke briefly, and put the phone away. "We just got our orders; we're to get out as quickly as possible." Ingersoll extended a hand. "I hope things go well for you, Professor."

"Thank you," said Harry, as he shook Ingersoll's hand.

Ingersoll took a look around. "This would be such a good story to tell my grandchildren someday," he said, a little wistfully.

"Tell you what, I'll tell my grandchildren," said Harry. "And I'll speak well of you."

Ingersoll smiled his thanks, turned, and headed off to talk to his men. As Harry walked back to the castle, he couldn't help wondering whether he would live long enough to have children, or grandchildren.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 12, Flora: As Hogwarts begins to settle into normal life, Harry faces the prospect of teaching his classmates while Hermione's life takes an unexpectedly sharp turn.

From Chapter 12: There was a collective gasp, and Hermione's mouth hung open for a few seconds, as if she was unable to believe what he had told her. The whole class stared at her.

12. Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Flora

Three hours later, Snape put down his wand, just having finished his first session with Harry since the magic had been interrupted. They were in the boys' bedroom at the Burrow; they couldn't have the session at Hogwarts, since Snape needed to be able to do the Legilimens spell.

"A last, desperate gasp on the part of the Dark Lord," was Snape's summary of the scene he had just seen in Harry's memory. "He clearly did not know the Aurors could track the source of a telephone call by magic, or he thought they would not bother to do so. He had to have known this had a fairly poor chance of success. It was fortunate happenstance that you were with Captain Ingersoll when he got the call, but even if you had not been, and had the Aurors not been monitoring his communications, he would have had to be able to take one of the six of you by surprise, an unlikely event at such a crowded school. The Dark Lord was clearly hoping to get lucky, and instead got unlucky, losing an operative."

"You said before you thought he would give up for now," Harry noted.

Snape nodded. "I did not think he would do something with such a small chance of success. I think it is safe to say that he will now concede defeat, as the Muggles should be gone by the time we return to Hogwarts."

"I wish they'd take that tank with them," grumbled Harry. "I don't know what we're going to do with it. Guess we could always put it by the Whomping Willow, it'd be interesting to see who'd win that fight."

"I am sure the Aurors would be most interested in wagering on such a contest," said Snape dryly. They probably would, thought Harry.

"Why do you think he demanded that any of the six of us be killed, and not just me?"

"A recognition on his part of the plan's low chance of success," replied Snape. "Ingersoll might not have been able to find you easily, and his looking for you might have attracted attention. He chose the other five as targets not because of your emotional connection with them, of course, but because they can use your spells." Harry nodded; that was what he had thought.

"I have a question for you, Professor," said Harry, not sure of what had made him think of it right then. "I've pretty much decided that I'm going to incorporate flying combat into my N.E.W.T. classes, since I think there'll be another attempt at the castle at some point, this one using magic. Some people might want to get on brooms and defend the castle, and if they do, I want them to know what they're doing. I'd like to know if I can have your permission to use the Slytherin Quidditch brooms when I do."

Snape considered it for a moment. "You may, provided that they are furnished to Slytherin students before those of any other House."

Harry chuckled. "You would say that. I suppose Ron is right, that you'll never agree to what Sprout and Flitwick are asking, about the Quidditch brooms being equal."

Snape smirked. "Of course. They do not expect that I will; they simply want to be on record with something to point at as an excuse the next time Slytherin wins the Quidditch Cup. I think, Professor, that you do not understand the bargain I made when I accepted the brooms."

"Sure, I do. It was that Malfoy got to be Seeker, right?"

"That was never explicitly stated, but of course understood, as such things usually are," explained Snape. "But I am referring to the greater bargain involved. Though I know little about Quidditch, I understood that there was not a good chance that Malfoy would be a better-than-average Seeker, as he did not make the team with his talent. This turned out to be the case; he never managed to defeat you, and Slytherin has not won the Cup since then. But Malfoy is gone now, and Slytherin still has the brooms. I accepted the prospect of six years of poor Quidditch teams with the idea that teams would be chosen based on talent after Malfoy graduated, and Slytherin would have an advantage for much more than six years. I accepted short-term disadvantage for long-term advantage. I mention this to you mainly because it is a useful strategic concept, which could benefit you to keep in mind should a pertinent situation present itself."

"Now all I have to do is recognize the situation when it happens," he said wryly. "But I see your point, and I'll keep it in mind. Anyway, I'll have Fawkes take you back to Hogwarts. I'm going to go downstairs and talk to Molly before I go back."

The phoenixes had come back a few minutes after the soldiers left Hogwarts, and continued eating the lutas. Students returned in force to the area near the Quidditch pitch, both to watch the phoenixes and to gawk at the

crashed plane. McGonagall had told the school in her speech on Wednesday morning that a team from the Ministry would be in to dismantle and Vanish it, as well as the parts of the Quidditch stands which had been destroyed, as soon as magic came back to Hogwarts.

The rest of Wednesday, and all of Thursday, passed without incident. Teachers met unofficially with their classes on Thursday, and Harry was bombarded with questions from both of his fourth-year classes about the energy of love, and requests to teach it. He gave them the warnings he had made sure Pansy gave the Slytherin second years, but they were not dissuaded. Harry decided to start by working on having them clear their minds, and he talked about his experiences in the previous year, though he knew they were familiar with them.

In the afternoon, he would normally have his Care of Magical Creatures class, and the seventh year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs met Hagrid at the usual place. The topic was phoenixes, even though they'd had lessons on them the previous year. About twenty phoenixes, including Fawkes, were eating lutas around Hagrid's hut. In the evening Harry relaxed with his friends, both outside near the phoenixes, and inside, in the Great Hall.

On Friday morning, he walked to the Great Hall as usual with Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny, and they took their seats. The food arrived five minutes later; as he ate, Harry noticed that it seemed to get hotter and hotter each day. He supposed the new food-delivery system was becoming more efficient.

"So, what classes do you have this morning?" Harry asked the others between bites of his toast.

"We're free, actually," said Hermione, "but remember, it's unofficial meetings, not actual classes. But our normal Friday schedule is unusual, I guess because of you; we have more afternoon classes in general than is usual because of the needs of your schedule. The only morning classes we have are the ones that you don't take, like Herbology. Today we have your class, of course, at one o'clock, and History of Magic at three o'clock. That was done so you could take it, I assume."

"One of Snape's last-minute adjustments to the schedule," confirmed Harry. "Well, it's nice for you that you have the morning free."

"While you have to listen to classes full of fifth years badger you to teach them how to use the energy of love," teased Ron. "You do have it rough."

"Friday's not going to be an easy day, in general," Harry pointed out. "Eight hours, six as a teacher, two as a student. Of course, Monday and Tuesday are like that, too, since I have the same morning schedule as last year, but now teaching sixth years in the afternoon on those days as well. I figured it out, all together I have... twenty-six hours a week as a teacher, and ten as a student. It's going to be a fun year."

"Just think, next year—I know, if you stay, you haven't decided—it'll seem easy, just teaching a regular schedule," said Hermione. "But you have to stay anyway, now that I'm going to be a teacher. You have to keep me company."

"Well, just humor me, I'd like to think I have a choice about it." Harry found that he didn't really want to think about what he would do next year; he just wanted to focus on this one first. He continued eating as Neville asked Hermione a

question, only to be interrupted by McGonagall's magnified voice.

"Excuse me, your attention for a moment," she said into the magical microphone. "I am very pleased to be able to report that magic has been restored to Hogwarts." The students burst into loud cheers and applause; Harry saw many sparks and other harmless spells come from students' wands as they confirmed the news. "The normal prohibition against the use of magic during mealtimes in the Great Hall is temporarily rescinded, and will be for another thirty seconds, after which I urge you to put away your wands." This got a few laughs as students continued doing simple spells.

"I wish to thank those who have been monitoring the Hogwarts gate and Hogsmeade on the video cameras, and inform you that your services are no longer needed, especially now that electronic equipment will no longer function. Classes will resume their normal schedules as of now. That is all."

Harry and his friends looked at each other. "I guess it doesn't really change much for us, does it," pointed out Ron.

"It does, in one way," said Harry. "I don't have to keep wondering if Voldemort's going to launch another attack before the magic comes back up. I can relax, at least a little. An eight-hour day doesn't seem that bad all of a sudden."

"And, we don't have to wear these anymore," added Ginny, taking off the strap around her neck with the cell phone connected to it. "What do we do with them?"

"Give them to John, I'd guess," said Hermione. "He was the liaison, he'll probably get them back to the Muggles."

"Poor Hannah," joked Ron, alluding to the fact that the phoenixes would soon be gone.

"Actually, they'll be around a little while longer," said Harry. "A day or two, at least. I need to get together with Sprout and Fawkes, have Fawkes tell me where there are plants remaining besides near the greenhouse and ask Sprout which ones should be kept. But they still need to eat more; just because we have magic back doesn't mean that there aren't too many of the plants around. We need to get the number down so low there's no question of this happening again."

"Oh, and the house-elves must be delirious," said Hermione. "We'll probably get some extra-nice feast tonight, they'll be so happy to be cooking again."

As she finished her sentence, hundreds of owls flew into the Hall, and mail started falling everywhere. "Oh, I forgot, there wasn't any mail while the magic was out, the owls didn't know where to go to deliver it. Probably I didn't notice because I never get any mail anyway," said Neville with a smile.

"I'll have to send you some," joked Hermione, as she picked up her copy of the day's Prophet. "I wonder if they'll charge me for the days I missed the Prophet. They might say it wasn't their fault that the magic was out. And I just remembered, we missed the articles about this. I wanted to see what they said."

"I'll ask the teachers, maybe some of them have them," said Harry. "Or, you could write to the Prophet, ask them for extra copies. You're getting famous now, they might be willing to do it."

She gave him a 'very funny' look. "They should do it anyway." Harry gathered up the thirty letters for him and stacked them as well as he could, planning to go back to Gryffindor Tower and get his teaching books, even though he felt he wouldn't be using them much that day.

After lunch, he headed for the staff room, knowing that this year he would have less time to spend there than last year, since his afternoon classes now started at one o'clock rather than two o'clock. He walked in and sat in his usual spot on one of the sofas, next to John. "So, Harry," asked John, "did your students bother you about teaching them the energy of love?"

"Yeah, a little," said Harry. At John's raised eyebrows, and those of a few other teachers, he admitted, "Okay, a lot. I must say, people seem incredibly motivated to do this. I tell them how hard it could be, and they're like, yeah, okay, fine, just teach us. I think I could tell them it'd take four hours of homework a night, and they'd still do it."

"That should hardly surprise you, Harry," pointed out McGonagall. "Not only is it highly useful in general, but they have just spent four days watching you and the other five being the only ones at the school able to do magic. This situation will likely not occur again, but that had a strong impression on most everyone. Even we found ourselves interested as we wondered how long it would take to get the magic back."

"You're interested in learning this, Professor?" asked Harry, surprised.

Sprout smiled. "Note Harry trying and failing to keep the surprise out of his tone," she said to general laughter.

"I'm not sure whether you were making fun of me, or her," Harry said to Sprout.

"Both, of course," she responded, with a teasing glance at McGonagall.

"Yes, she is making the rather obvious point that I am not the most emotionally demonstrative person in the world," retorted McGonagall.

"I guess it's like me with being embarrassed, it's so easy a joke to make," agreed Harry. "But you know, Professor, I didn't use to be like this, either. I never would have thought I could do this, until I did it."

"He means, 'even you could do it,' Minerva," said Sprout helpfully.

"Yes, thank you, Pomona, I did gather that," said McGonagall. "So, Harry, before you unwittingly give her any more material for humor at my expense, let me say that I do not think I am temperamentally suited to learn it, and leave it at that."

"But isn't that all the more reason that you should try?" persisted Harry. "It would be a good example for students who didn't think they could. I mean, if you could learn it..." Harry trailed off as he realized he didn't want to say the words 'anyone could.' His meaning didn't escape the other teachers, of course, who burst out in loud laughter. Embarrassed, he looked up at McGonagall, who was giving him a look that said, 'please, don't say anything more.' "Sorry," he said.

Now, she smiled a little. "You could not make fun of me any better if you tried."

"Which is what makes it so funny, of course," said Sprout, still recovering from her laughter. "Oh, my..."

"Seriously, Professor," said John, "I'm not trying to pile on, I swear, but you don't think you could do it if you tried?"

McGonagall sighed. "If it were critically important, as it was with Harry last year, I might be able to. It is not impossible. But Harry has said that doing so more or less changed who he was, and we have all seen that. I simply feel... that I am comfortable with who I am. Perhaps I would be a better person, as Harry has become. I suppose I lack the motivation necessary to overcome my reluctance."

"I guess I can understand that," said Harry. "It's hard for me to imagine having done this if not for the fact that I had no choice. If, say, Neville had come up with this, I'd have said, that's great, but it's not something I could do, or would want to. I'd have been much too embarrassed."

"Ah, so you're saying that Minerva doesn't do it because she's embarrassed," said Sprout, deadpan.

"Maybe I should just keep my mouth shut for a while," said Harry, to laughter.

"Alas, it is far too late for that," said a resigned McGonagall.

"Well, then," continued Harry, "Anyway, I do wonder if the students are so willing to try it now because of what just happened, but might lose their motivation as time goes by. I'm concerned about a lot of them failing to get it."

"There's not much you can do about that, Harry, just try it and see how it goes," advised John.

"I guess," Harry reluctantly agreed. Glancing up, he added, "Say, John, you'd be a pretty good candidate." To his surprise, all of the teachers looked at him with confusion; he suddenly realized that they were wondering whether or not he was joking. "Um, except, of course, for your total inability to do any magic whatsoever..."

Everyone laughed again. "Yes, John, except for that, you'd be great," agreed Flitwick.

Harry now joined in the laughter until it ended. "Boy, I've got to start thinking before I open my mouth. If I keep this up, the seventh years'll have me for lunch."

"Yes, that will be odd, teaching your peers, not to mention your close friends," agreed Sprout. "You'll be handing out detentions right and left."

Harry chuckled. "They'd just laugh if I tried, which of course I won't. No, I expect to be made fun of a certain amount, which I don't mind. I'd do it if I were them."

"Very sporting of you, Harry," remarked Dentus. "So, is there always this much humor in here, or is it just that Harry's having an off day?"

"Or an 'on' day, depending on how you want to look at it," said Sprout. "We do have fun, though usually not quite so much."

The level of 'fun' decreased as the conversation continued, which was fine with Harry. Soon it was time to leave for his class, and he got up to go. John and Flitwick humorously wished him good luck, and he walked to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

He walked in at two minutes to one, and all twenty-five seats were occupied. He had been a teacher long enough not to be nervous, but this was definitely a new experience, looking out into the class and seeing Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Pansy, not to mention so many others he knew. His friends were smiling, no doubt wondering what he was going to say. He wished he knew.

"Okay... this is a little strange for me, as I'm sure it is for you. I've been your classmate for so long, it's probably... strange, as I said, for you to look up and see me here. I guess we'll all just get used to it as time goes by. Now, let's see, should I call the roll, or..." This got a mild laugh, and Hannah raised her hand and said, "Here!" Harry chuckled. "Yes, you are always first, aren't you... actually, I was just going to look at the roll sheet to make sure of who was signed up for the class, let's see... did you guys know the roll sheets are color-coded by which House you're in? Pretty convenient..." He saw a few looks of surprise, and Hermione, to his surprise sitting two rows back from the front, gave a slight nod. "Yes, Hermione, I'm not surprised you'd know..."

She rolled her eyes and gave him an annoyed look; he smiled. "Sorry. Wow, only two Slytherins, Pansy and Blaise. The other girls didn't take this class last year?" Pansy shook her head. "Well, that's why we were able to have everyone in this class. Let's see, seven Gryffindors, eight Hufflepuffs, eight Ravenclaws, and two Slytherins, so twenty-five in all. Sorry the desks are a little tight, but it should be okay. I was thinking, on nice days, we could have class outside sometimes."

"Today's a nice day," pointed out Hannah.

Harry chuckled. "Sorry, Hannah, not today, with over a hundred phoenixes out there. Nobody would pay attention

to the class, including me. As I was saying, Professor Snape, who as you may or may not know made the schedule, was kind enough to put everyone into the one class so my already busy schedule wouldn't be any worse. Now... yes, Sally-Anne?"

Sally-Anne Perks put down her hand. "I'm sorry, but did you just use the words 'Professor Snape' and 'kind' in the same sentence?"

This got a good laugh, and Harry had to try not to join them. "Well, it helps me a lot. I'm only teaching and studying for thirty-six hours a week instead of thirty-eight if he hadn't done that, and he did it without my asking him to. So, yes, I'm going to stick with what I said. And, seriously, as a Hogwarts teacher, I can't condone making jokes at the expense of other teachers while I'm teaching. So I'll have to ask you not to do that from now on. Yes, Justin?"

"But we can make jokes at your expense, right?"

Most everyone laughed, including Harry. "Yes, of course, Justin. I did say 'other' teachers. Considering how unusual the situation is, I'd be surprised if you didn't have a little fun with me. Oh, that reminds me... a few days ago, some of you were there, Ron made fun of me by calling me 'Professor.' Now, all the students in the other classes do, but I'd really rather you all called me 'Harry.' Yes, Mandy?"

"Harry, I know you have a lot of friends here, but I hope you're not going to be making fun of each other too much. I think this is an important subject, and I want to learn as much as I can in the time we have."

Harry pushed back his annoyance; he felt Mandy's comment was premature, and a little rude, but he tried hard to keep an even temper when he was teaching. Mandy was a

Ravenclaw, someone he knew to be a serious student. He had never gotten to know her well, but he respected her. "Mandy, I completely agree. I was just making a comment on the unusual situation we have here; probably never before at Hogwarts has a teacher taught students the same age. But anybody who knows me knows that I'm deadly serious about this subject. What you learn here can save your life; it's saved mine more than once. What I want for you, for everyone to get out of this class is the ability to be attacked by a Death Eater and stay alive. And just so you know, I'm not going to be teaching directly for the N.E.W.T.s, I'm going to be teaching what I think will help you stay alive. Now, most years, it would sound silly for me to say that. But not this year; I think the last five days would show that that's true. So, that's my focus."

Mandy nodded. "I didn't mean to criticize you, Harry. I know you're serious about this, and the younger Ravenclaws who've taken your classes raved about you as a teacher, said they'd never learned so much. I guess I just felt like it would be easy for you to get distracted here, with all your friends here."

Harry nodded. "Well, I'm going to give you an overview of what I want to do in this class. As I said, the main theme is, surviving a Death Eater attack. To do that, one important thing to be able to do is duel. We're going to spend a lot of time with dueling, which is both a defensive and offensive skill. Yes, Jonathan?"

A sandy-haired Hufflepuff put down his hand. "You showed the first years this fight you had with the Aurors against Voldemort on Sunday night, and they said you were knocking down Death Eaters with one hit each, better than the Aurors were doing. Is that something you can teach us?"

Harry fought the impulse to be embarrassed at the mention of his strength. "Not that exactly, no, I'm afraid. You already know Stunning spells, and how well they work is just a question of how strong you are. Apparently, I'm just... unusually strong."

Mandy raised her hand again. "Are you that strong because you use the energy of love?"

Jonathan answered before Harry could. "Obviously not, because the others can use it, but they're not nearly as strong as he is."

"Hey!" said Ron quietly but sharply; Harry wasn't sure how much of it was meant as humor. "I lifted thirty people, you know."

"Couldn't lift a tank, though," said Justin humorously.

"Like to see you try," Ron retorted, in the same vein.

"All right, all right," said Harry. "To answer Mandy's question, that's part of the reason. Using it, I'm stronger than I would be without using it--"

Neville interrupted. "Excuse me, Harry, but there's something I think I should say, if you don't mind." Harry gestured for him to go ahead. Sitting next to Hermione, on the far left side of the middle row, Neville turned in his seat to face the others. "Harry is much stronger using it than not using it. You need to understand, Harry is just incredibly strong, stronger than the strongest Auror, than Dumbledore, than Voldemort. He--"

"We don't know that I'm stronger than Voldemort, Neville--"

"Yes, we do, Harry," responded Neville firmly. "When you and the Aurors rescued me and Hermione, you put down an anti-Disapparation field on him, and he tried and failed to Disapparate. That means you're stronger than him." In a serious tone, Neville turned again to the rest of the class. "Harry tends to understate things like that, because he gets embarrassed by them. I'm not saying this to make fun of him, but so you'll know, and take it into account when he talks about this kind of thing. In June, a senior Auror said, 'If there's a stronger wizard than Harry, I don't know who it is.' As for the rest of us, I think I'm the strongest besides Harry—I can hold my own with the Aurors who aren't so strong—and I'm not that much stronger than the others. We're all pretty strong, compared to average, and I'm sure that's because we use the energy of love. The fact that we're not that strong compared to Harry is just because he's in a totally different category."

There was silence for a few seconds, Harry not knowing what to say. As he was about to speak, Susan did. "Wow, he's right, you really are embarrassed." Most of the class laughed.

"Well, I'll try to be as factual about that kind of thing as I can," said Harry, "and I'm sure that Neville or the others will correct me if I get something wrong. Now, to finish answering the question, why am I so strong besides the energy of love... we don't know this for a fact, but Professor Dumbledore thought it was true, so I'd bet it probably is... we know that when he gave me this scar, Voldemort unintentionally passed on other things to me, like being a Parselmouth. We think that one thing he passed on was his strength. Now, that should mean that when I'm as strong as I'm going to get—and I don't think I'm there yet—I should be as strong as him. But, I'm already stronger. So, I think that my 'base' strength is the same as his, but anyone who uses

the energy of love will have their strength enhanced. That's why I'm stronger than him. We think, anyway.

"Now, of course, the question of how strong I am isn't all that relevant to this class, so—" Harry stopped himself as he saw Mandy's hand go up.

"Well, yes and no," she said. "I see what you mean, but if we know you did something, it helps us to know how much your strength had to do with it, and how much was because of things you know, things we could also do."

"Don't worry, I will address that kind of thing when I teach, and if I try to teach something that requires a certain amount of strength, I'll be sure to mention it. I'm not going to be teaching area-effect spells, for example, because they require a lot of strength. Now, what was I saying before... oh, yes, what I'll be teaching. As I said, lots of dueling, being able to duel is very important, you don't have a hope against a Death Eater unless you can do that." Harry glanced at Blaise Zabini at the back, looking intimidated, as though sure he had no chance of ever being able to duel, or even belong in the class.

"Another thing I want to spend some time on, for this class and the sixth years, is combat flying. Why? I expect this school to be attacked sometime this year. Okay, it already has been, but without magic. I expect some sort of attack with magic. I'm imagining a situation in which hostile forces are bearing down on the castle, either having taken down or avoided Hogwarts' defenses. In an open area, being on brooms in combat can be a big advantage. It's also a risk—you get hit, you can fall, so the higher up you are, the riskier it is. If that happens, if we get attacked like that, I don't expect everyone in this class to grab a broom and go out there and fight. That's a decision everyone has to make for

themselves. But I want those who choose to do so to be able to do it confidently and effectively; you can easily get killed by not knowing what you're doing. So, we're spending some time on that, and that'll definitely be outside. Let me ask you... please raise your hand if you've had minimal experience on a broom, or are uncomfortable flying." Almost half the class raised their hands, including Pansy, Ernie, Blaise, Neville, and Hermione. "Okay, the only homework I'm giving today is for those of you who raised your hands, get in an hour or two of flying time. It doesn't matter where or how high, you can fly two feet off the ground if you want to. Just practice flying. Madam Hooch can help you if you need it."

He paused and looked around the room. The class was rapt, obviously listening carefully and taking him seriously. "We're also going to be practicing group combat situations, like ten of us against ten Death Eaters, what to do in that kind of situation. Also, when dueling and in combat, specific spells that tend to be effective against Death Eaters, and defenses against spells they commonly use. Any questions so far?"

Hannah raised her hand. "Is it just by accident that you haven't mentioned anything yet about teaching the energy of love?"

"No, I was waiting for one of you to bring it up. I'll explain why in a minute, but first, let me ask you... raise your hand if you're interested in me teaching that." Every hand in the class went up. "Okay, so everyone's interested. Now, as my friends know, I hesitated to teach this at all this year, because it's so new. Before you teach something, you should know exactly how it works, know everything about it. To say I don't know those things is putting it mildly. There's a whole lot I don't know about this, including the best way to teach it. I've... I was going to say I taught the other five, but it

doesn't feel right to say that. Maybe it's better to say, I helped them learn how to use it. It's not really something you can teach, like, you do this, this, this, that, that, study, and then you'll know how to do it. This doesn't work that way. It's partly a choice, making a commitment to be a certain way. I think I can help you get there, like I helped them, but it has to be something you really want to do. If there's some part of you that says, this is dumb, but I'll do it anyway because I want to use the spells, it's not going to work; that much I do know.

"Also, you may know this already, but there are some aspects of this that are going to be embarrassing, and not just for me because I'm easily embarrassed. Most people aren't totally comfortable with the idea of love, talking about it, sometimes even thinking about it. I'm not saying that you will, or have to, start out not being embarrassed about it; I didn't. But for this to work, you will end up that way. You have to completely embrace the idea of love, which is difficult for most people. I would have thought it was impossible for me, before this happened. But you all already know what happened last year, why I dove into it so strongly; I just had no choice. You all saw me answer those questions from Hugo in the Great Hall after the first demonstration of my anti-Cruciatius Curse shield. I explained exactly what I did and why I did it. Let me tell you, I was embarrassed as hell. But it was important, so I did it. I just want you to know what you might be getting into." He paused, looking around at their faces, which were solemn, serious. "Now, keeping all that in mind, please raise your hand if you want to work on this in class." Again, everyone raised their hands.

He nodded. "All right, then. Just so you know. Fortunately, for this class, I'll have help. Neville, Ron, Hermione, and Pansy may be able to help you. I developed the ability to do

this in a short, intense period of time, and I was helped by having a phoenix on my shoulder the whole time, helping me to be calm and focus. They, and now you, have to learn it a different way: over a longer period of time, with no motivation except whatever's in your mind. Since they learned it that way, they may be able to help you as much as I can. This'll be unlike anything you've ever learned in a class before. Yes, Mandy?"

"I have a question, not for you, but for the other four here who can do this. I'd like to know, from each of you, what was your motivation to do this. You didn't have Voldemort breathing down your neck like Harry did. What made you want to do this?"

"That's a good question, Mandy," said Harry. "And I don't only mean good as in interesting, but as in relevant." He gestured to his friends in their seats to go ahead and answer her question.

"Well, I'll be first, I guess," said Hermione, looking slightly nervous but trying to overcome it. "Probably everyone's reason is a little different. I was thinking of a few things. Harry mentioned it to us-this happened just after he came up with the Killing Curse shield-because he wanted to know if it could be taught, and we were the most reasonable ones to try to teach it to. I realized that if it could be taught, if it became widespread, it could have a huge impact on wizarding society. That thought gave me motivation to want to do it, to see if it could be done. Also, I knew the spells would be really useful, especially for us, who are always getting into danger because we try to keep Harry alive while Voldemort tries to kill him. And of course, I love Harry, we all do, the other five of us. There's nothing I wouldn't do for him if I could, and he wouldn't have asked if it weren't important to him. But probably the biggest reason of all is that we'd all

seen how it changed Harry, in a very positive way. I was in love with Neville, and I knew how powerful a feeling it was, whether it was romantic love, like him, or friendship love, like Harry and the others. It just seemed obvious that it was a good thing to do."

Ron spoke next. "See, this is the problem with answering after Hermione, she's taken all the good answers," he said wryly, drawing a laugh. "In a way, I'm probably the best person to answer this question, because it was hardest for me. I'm not naturally expressive, like Hermione is; it's hard for me to tell someone I love them, or even think like that. I wasn't thinking about the society-wide impact, like she was, but all three of the other reasons work for me, I think. Also, they were all going to do it, and I didn't want to be left out. But I have to admit, if it had been just Harry and I, and he'd come to me and said 'do you want to do this,' I'd have hesitated, might not have done it. It was a huge challenge for me, and I'd be surprised if it wasn't for some of you as well. It's easier to do something like this if others are as well, especially people you feel close to. And even saying that much is something I couldn't have done back in March, so that may tell you something.

"I should say also that I had serious motivation at the end, maybe even more than at the beginning. You may know that I was the last one to get it, and the others were helping the Aurors out with the Apparation crisis. I wanted to really badly, and that gave me motivation to do stuff that was very difficult for me to do. You won't have that kind of motivation, but maybe you could imagine the possibility of saving your family, or your future spouse, by using a Killing Curse shield. You never know, it could happen."

"In my case, I was starting to fancy Ron then, so I thought it might get us closer together," joked Pansy, getting a big

laugh and an embarrassed look from Ron. "I'm joking, of course, but who knows, that may have been in the back of my mind. Probably the biggest reason for me was the love and respect I had for Harry. If he wanted to do it, then I wanted to help him. The other reasons were good, but secondary."

"I should have said," put in Hermione, "that any one of the four reasons I mentioned would have been enough for me to want to do it. Sorry, go ahead, Neville."

"Like Ron, the last three reasons Hermione mentioned are true for me as well. Probably the biggest one was seeing the effect it had on Harry, how it changed him. He was just much more comfortable after that, and I felt as though even if that was going to be the only effect, it would still be worth doing."

Harry was about to speak when Mandy asked another question. "Ron, Hermione said that all five of you love Harry. You're comfortable with saying something like that?"

Ron paused for a second. "Well, 'comfortable' may be too strong a word..." There was some mild laughter; he continued, "The part of me that isn't comfortable saying that in front of twenty-five people would say something like, 'no, we're just good friends.' But yes, I could say that. As I said, that kind of thing was very hard for me, because you always hesitate to say something like that because someone will make fun of you. But I knew no one was going to, in the group of the six of us, and that helped."

"That reminds me," put in Harry, "of something I wanted to make sure to say, and it's very important." He paused to emphasize the point. "I would ask all of you, as seriously as I can, not to make fun of anyone about this. Even a friend,

even if you don't mean anything nasty. Ron's 'just friends' joke is a joke at his own expense, about being embarrassed, and there's no problem with that. It doesn't help, but it doesn't hurt, if it's only once in a while. But making a joke at someone else's expense is a totally different thing. It's going to be very difficult for some people, maybe most people, to overcome their embarrassment about this, and being made fun of would just make it that much harder. Being comfortable is essential for this. The more you support those around you, the easier it'll be for everyone."

After a pause, Mandy had yet another question. "Can you tell me... and let me ask you, Ron, since you said it was the hardest for you... how would you say it's changed you? In what way do you feel different?"

Ron raised his eyebrows and thought for a few seconds. "I guess I just feel... happier, more comfortable, like Neville said Harry was. I realize I don't have to be embarrassed about things I would have before, especially things to do with friendship and love. So, my experience is probably pretty different from Hermione's, since she wasn't embarrassed about that kind of stuff in the first place."

"Well, a little," she said. "I think everyone is, even if only a little. I just said and thought them anyway. But yes, I think I could say that it made me feel more... calm and peaceful, I guess. It's hard to put into words."

"One thing that may help," suggested Harry, "is to think about Professor Dumbledore. Even if you weren't lucky enough to know him well, as I got to last year, you know how he was: always calm, tranquil, friendly... I guess 'serene' would be a good word to describe him in general. He told me that what I discovered made him realize that he had been using the energy of love all along, he just had never thought

of it like that. He was just naturally that kind of person, and it made his magic strong. I think that getting to the state where you can use the energy of love makes you more like he was. I'm not like he was, though I would love to be someday. But now, I'm more like he was than before I did this. I'd say, look at him as an ideal, of where this could possibly lead. It takes you in that direction, and I think it's a very good direction to go."

Sally-Anne raised her hand. "How long do you think it'll take to learn?"

"Again, one of those things I don't know. It took them three months, Ron and Pansy a bit longer. But since we were meeting longer and more often than this class will, and since we were all good friends and weren't so embarrassed about saying things around each other, it might have gone faster for us. I just can't know. If I had done this with test groups first, people of different ages and situations, I'd know more. But since everyone wants to do this so badly, I can't take the time to do that. I'm going to just do the best I can, as I'm sure all of you will do. We'll find out together."

When no one asked any more questions, he said, "Okay, the way I want to structure this, at least at first, is to work on that for a certain amount of time every lesson, somewhere between twenty minutes and a half hour. Sometimes it'll be at the beginning of a lesson, sometimes at the end, until I decide which one I think is better. Today, it'll be at the end, and next time, at the beginning.

"All right. Today we're going to work on the Repulsion Charm, since recent circumstances showed how useful it can be, and we'll make a start on dueling. But first I want to talk about something Professor Dumbledore told us about last year, but I want to say it again, because I think it's really

important. He told us about how important our thoughts were in how we did our magic, and I think my experience shows how true that is. When I—yes, Ernie?"

"Sorry, Harry, I should have asked this before, I just forgot I was going to. What you said about thoughts reminded me. First of all, did you know the Sorting Hat was going to sing what it did?"

Harry chuckled. "No, I sure didn't. I was very surprised."

"I saw his face, sitting up there," added Padma. "He was really surprised."

"Anyway," went on Ernie, "I have the words to what it sang, and—"

"How did you get the words?" asked Susan. "Were you writing them down?"

"No, of course not," said Ernie. "I found out later that later Sunday night, some Slytherin and Gryffindor second years got together and shared their recollections, and got down the whole song on paper. No one remembered it all, but together they were able to do it. After the magic came back, they were giving out copies. Anyway, I have a question about it. Most of it's fairly clear, just expressed in symbols, but the last verse... 'So keep in mind that you may know/What you think you do not/And what you think that you don't have/You have already got.' What did the Hat mean by that?"

"To be honest, Ernie, I'm not totally sure. It would be funny to think the Hat knows something about this that I don't, but it's always possible. What makes sense just off the top of my head is that it's saying that everyone can do this, even if

you don't think you can. Hermione, you're better at this sort of thing than I am. What do you think?"

"Well, what you said is the obvious interpretation," she said, apparently thinking out loud. "I have a feeling there's more to it than that, but I just don't know what it is." Then, humorously, she added, "Then again, maybe I do know what it is, I just don't think I do."

Harry laughed, as did some of the class. "Yes, that's always possible."

"If we didn't already know the Hat was singing about the energy of love, we'd have thought it was just talking about people's potential in general," suggested Mandy. "Maybe it was saying that there's lots of potential in this, maybe even more than Harry knows."

"That's definitely possible, because there's so much I don't know," agreed Harry.

"But the song seemed to be directed to the students, not Harry," argued Ernie.

"I did say 'maybe,'" pointed out Mandy.

"We could speculate all day about what it meant," said Harry, "but unless one of us goes to McGonagall's office and puts it on, we're not going to find out. Even then, it probably wouldn't tell us.

"Now, what was I saying... oh, yes, thoughts. Especially when thinking about the energy of love, which he didn't know about when he told us this last year, it makes perfect sense. I think you all know that the way we know if someone is using the energy of love is that their score on that meter from last year is 100, which means that their nonverbal

spells are as strong as their spoken ones. It suggests that thoughts are what is really important, and that if we're focused enough, the words are unnecessary. Thoughts--"

Harry cut himself off as, to his great surprise, a phoenix materialized in the middle of the room, in the air. It flew around for a few seconds, then landed on the podium. Harry took a few steps toward it and said, "Yes, can I help you?"

"It's the same one from the other day, in the Great Hall," pointed out Hannah. "The female one."

"Maybe you're supposed to do something, Harry," suggested Justin.

"Fawkes would tell me if I was," said Harry. The phoenix took flight again, flying around the room, then landed on Hermione's desk. Very surprised, she looked at Harry, who shrugged.

"Maybe you and Hermione are supposed to do something," joked Justin.

"Maybe," agreed Harry. "Let me ask Fawkes, he should be able to ask her, and find out." Fawkes had appeared in the middle of his sentence, and perched on the podium. Harry cleared his mind to get impressions. His eyes went wide, then he smiled, suddenly very happy.

"What?" asked Hermione, confused.

He walked over to her side of the classroom, still smiling. "She's chosen you."

There was a collective gasp, and Hermione's mouth hung open for a few seconds, as if she was unable to believe what he had told her. The whole class stared at her. She turned to

look at Neville, who looked both stunned and happy. Then tears started to come to her eyes, and she said, "Oh, my God," repeating the phrase three times. She looked at the phoenix, then she smiled, tears still rolling down her face, and petted the phoenix gently. "I can't believe it... I just can't believe it..."

"I can believe it," said Harry, looking at her happily; she looked up at him and smiled gratefully through her tears. He suddenly got a powerful feeling of joy, and then realized that Fawkes was sending him what the female phoenix was sending Fawkes, which she of course got from Hermione. "Hang on, I'm getting impressions from Fawkes... a lot of them, there's a lot he wants to tell me. The first thing is that she, that phoenix, is very pleased at your reaction. She can feel your happiness, how thrilled you are, and she's... wow, this is interesting. She's never been bonded to a human before, you're her first one."

"You mentioned that, when she was with us the other morning," pointed out Hannah, still amazed at what had just happened.

"Yes, I did, I just forgot," agreed Harry. "So, she didn't really know what it was like, being bonded, feeling what someone else was feeling. She felt it just as strongly as you did, Hermione, because she wasn't used to it. Would everyone give me a minute, Fawkes is trying to tell me a lot of things. I know this isn't relevant to the class, but I promise I'll make up the time some other time, this doesn't happen every day."

"No, it's okay," said Padma and Mandy at the same time, and were seconded by others. Harry nodded and was quiet, focused on Fawkes's impressions. He could hear people talking, but he didn't hear what they were saying. Finally,

after two minutes, he opened his eyes and addressed the class.

"Wow... there's quite a story behind this. First, Fawkes and this phoenix—she doesn't have a name, by the way, so Hermione, you'll have to give her one. Phoenixes don't name themselves, they have no use for them. Anyway, Fawkes and she are... I don't know what term to use, maybe 'long-term partners' might be best. As some of you know, like Hannah, Hermione, and anyone else who's read 'Reborn From the Ashes,' phoenixes only mate when there's a decline in the phoenix population and they need more. Fawkes and she have been... partners for a very long time, he can't give me a number, but I get the impression of hundreds of years. They've mated twice, and will again when it's needed by the phoenix population. I wouldn't say they're married, but as close as phoenixes ever get to that.

"He's been companioning humans for hundreds of years, and she never has. It's a very important choice for phoenixes, and they take it very seriously. Everyone knows how loyal they are to their companions. She had never wanted to do that, preferring to just be free to do what she wanted. Now, phoenixes exchange impressions and feelings all the time, especially with their partners, so their partners always know how they're feeling. She had begun to notice recently—and when I say 'recently,' for phoenixes, that means the last fifty years or so—that Fawkes had been happier, more content even than usual. He told her..." Harry took a deep breath, aware that tears were threatening, and continued, "...he told her that Albus was the best companion he ever had, and that he thought I might end up being a lot like Albus." Fighting to stay in control, he glanced up to see his friends smiling at him.

"Anyway, when this thing with the lutas happened, of course she was one of the ones who came here to eat them, and she was in more contact with him than usual. Fawkes is happy that by companioning Albus, then me, he's playing an important part in helping the wizarding world be a better place, fighting against wizards like Voldemort. By being here, she started to get a stronger impression of what the wizarding world was like, and why Fawkes likes to companion humans. She expressed interest, provided there was anyone who would be a good companion. Fawkes said he thought there was, and mentioned two people in particular: Hermione and Neville."

There was another gasp, and everyone now looked in Neville's direction, even more surprised than they had been with Hermione. "You must be kidding," said Neville, disbelievingly.

Harry smiled. "Neville, do I look like I'm kidding? I'm definitely not. Anyway, she checked you both out on Monday morning, when we were out looking at the phoenixes. She liked you both, and she spent some time with each of you over the next two days, while you were sleeping. Phoenixes do that sometimes so they can get a stronger feeling about what the person is like."

"Did Fawkes do that with you?" asked Justin.

"No, he didn't need to. I had spent enough time around Dumbledore by then, he knew what I was like. So, after a few days, she talked to Fawkes—let me stop for a minute and say that when I say 'talk,' I mean 'communicate,' and that when I say things they 'said,' I'm translating nonverbal impressions into human words and ideas. She came to Fawkes and said that she wanted to bond with both of them." This prompted a few exclamations of surprise,

especially from Hermione and Neville. "Fawkes said she couldn't, that she had to choose one. She argued with him, saying that since Neville and Hermione are partners and are going to spend their lives together, she could be with both of them at the same time most of the time. He said that the bonding wouldn't work properly if she tried to do it with both, that she could find herself torn in two directions. He also pointed out that there aren't that many humans that phoenixes feel are appropriate for companioning, and it wouldn't be fair of her to take two good ones for herself. They argued some more, and she finally agreed to choose one. It was hard for her; she liked them both, and couldn't say she liked one more than the other. He advised her to choose the one whose personality seemed most attuned to hers, and she ended up choosing Hermione. She was also consoled by the idea that by being around Hermione, she'd be around Neville a lot too, even though they wouldn't be bonded."

"Did Fawkes say exactly what it was about Hermione's personality that made her choose Hermione?" asked Hannah, clearly very interested.

"Yes, he gave me a sense of it, which I'll put into words as best I can. You all know how hard Hermione studies, how much she wants to know everything. You may remember than in third year, she used this device from the Ministry to get her an extra three hours every day, so she could take all twelve classes offered. This phoenix eventually decided that a human who did that was kind of similar to a phoenix who had never had a companion, but wanted two the first time she did it." The class laughed, and even Hermione smiled. "There's a similarity in personality there, and that's what made her choose Hermione."

Still amazed, Ron asked, "So, does this mean Neville will get chosen the next time a phoenix wants a companion?"

Harry glanced at Neville, who still looked amazed that he had been so strongly considered. "No, it doesn't work like that. It does mean that if another phoenix is looking for a companion, and Fawkes knows about it, he'll point him or her in Neville's direction. But phoenixes choose based on the feeling they get, and different phoenixes have different feelings. Neville could get chosen tomorrow, or twenty years from now, or never. It's all up to what any given phoenix decides. But he clearly is a likely candidate."

"I wish she could have chosen both of us," said Hermione.

Neville shook his head. "I'm glad she chose you, really. Like she said, I'll get to be around her, through you. I'm really happy for you." Tears in her eyes again, Hermione reached over and took Neville's hand, holding it for a few seconds before letting go.

Harry smiled again at Hermione. "Congratulations, Hermione, this is so great. I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you, Harry," she said, obviously very excited. "It's so amazing, I still can't believe it. And it's even better that she and Fawkes are connected in that way. Does this mean that if you wanted to talk to me, that you could tell Fawkes, who would tell her, and I would know?"

"Something like that, but it would be unusual that that would be necessary. What's more likely is that if, say, you were really sad about something, and she and Fawkes thought I might be able to make you feel better, Fawkes would let me know how you felt, even if you didn't ask her to have him do that. Of course, Neville's usually going to be the one to make you feel better. It's just an example."

"Maybe I was the one who made her feel sad," suggested Neville humorously. Hermione gave him a 'don't say that' look, as Harry chuckled.

"Okay, well, I guess we should get back to what I was talking about, if I can remember what it was, so--"

"Sorry, Harry," interrupted Mandy. "One question before you do that... Fawkes chose you, and this phoenix was interested in Hermione and Neville; all of you use the energy of love. So did Dumbledore. Does that have anything to do with it?"

Looking at the class, Harry could see there was a lot of interest in the question. "I can't say exactly; phoenixes don't think in those terms. But it's really starting to look like it, and it makes perfect sense. As Hagrid told us last year, phoenixes are attracted to love more than anything else. Fawkes chose me at almost exactly the time I committed myself to the idea of focusing on love as strongly as possible to fight off Voldemort. And I know that Fawkes likes spending time around the six of us, he's let me know that this summer, he really enjoyed it. So, that's probably true."

Sally-Anne spoke. "So, if we learn how to use the energy of love, it means we might get chosen by a phoenix?"

Harry saw a certain look in Hannah's eyes. "Hannah, I have a feeling you can answer that, so go ahead."

She looked at Sally-Anne. "If you do it even partly for that reason, then no, you probably won't. The best way to not be chosen by a phoenix is to want to be chosen. They know why you want to be chosen, and it's usually not for what they would consider to be the right reasons. For example, I can be pretty sure that not only is Neville really happy for Hermione, but isn't even a little jealous that the phoenix chose her instead of him." Harry and most of the class

looked at Neville, who nodded. "I know that because if Neville was the type to be jealous of something like that, he wouldn't have even been considered. I mean, I..." Looking abashed, she nonetheless continued, "I was kind of jealous when Fawkes chose Harry. I wished it could have been me, since I like phoenixes so much. I knew that kind of attitude made it less likely that I'd ever be chosen, but I couldn't help it. It's kind of ironic, though, that wanting it makes it much less likely to happen. Who knows, maybe if I get to where I can use the energy of love, it'll mean I won't feel that way anymore."

"It is hard to say," agreed Harry. "And Hannah, I admire you for saying that, I know it wasn't easy. Saying things like that, that are hard to say, is the kind of thing that's going to help in getting to the place where you can use the energy of love. I know that all six of us have said things like that, that weren't easy to say."

"That's putting it mildly," muttered Ron, to scattered chuckling.

Mandy raised her hand again. "Sorry again, a question related to my last one... and my apologies in advance to Ron, Pansy, and Ginny, but--"

Ron turned in his seat and finished her question for her. "Why them, and not us, if we can all use the energy of love. Don't worry, it's all right. It is a good question. I suspect Harry's going to say it's just a matter of taste on Fawkes's part."

"Five points for Gryffindor, Ron," joked Harry. "Yes, that's exactly what I was going to say. Another phoenix might make a different choice. But it's also that Fawkes was looking to see who would be a good companion for this

particular phoenix. Phoenixes have different personalities, and... yes, I'm getting something from Fawkes, he agrees with what I'm saying. He didn't mean to suggest by not specifically recommending the others that they weren't suitable."

"But it doesn't really matter anyway," said Pansy. "It would be pretty egotistical of us to say, just because we can use the energy of love, we should be considered as phoenix companions. I don't think anybody can have that expectation, no matter how many of their friends get chosen."

"Of course, that wasn't the point of Mandy's question anyway," said Harry, as Mandy nodded in agreement. "I guess the answer to her question would be that probably using the energy of love makes you more attractive to a phoenix, but not an automatic candidate. It's a very particular choice, and I'm pretty sure it's very rare for a phoenix to have two people who she felt were equally appropriate."

"Or," suggested Neville, "it's partly because she's new to humans, and didn't have a strong idea about the kind of personality she wanted. I mean, it's probably the case that Fawkes chose you because you have qualities that are a lot like Dumbledore's." As Harry started to open his mouth, Neville quickly continued, "And before you start with your 'oh, I'm not nearly as good as Dumbledore' thing, keep in mind that Fawkes pretty much said you were as good as him, so I'm not buying it. You should just say, 'yes, Neville, you're probably right.'"

The class laughed heartily at Harry's expense as he looked back at Neville and tried not to smile. After the laughter had died down, said to Neville, "Yes, Neville, you're probably

right." The class laughed again, as Harry and Neville smiled. "The people who know you," said Harry to the class, "are the ones who won't let you get away with anything. Okay, back to the subject of the class, though first I'll say that I'll forgive Hermione in advance if her attention wanders occasionally. She'd probably just like to go back to her dormitory and enjoy the feeling."

"I'll do that later," she assured him. "Go ahead, I'll be listening."

"Okay, we'll have to do the Repulsion Charm next time, this took up time I didn't expect, and I want to start dueling today. But back to thoughts and magic..." Harry felt a warm glow for the rest of the lesson, and he wondered if he was feeling Hermione's feelings, transmitted by two phoenixes.

An hour and twenty minutes later, he called the lesson to a halt. "Okay, it looks like we're out of time, but that was a very good start, both on the dueling and the energy of love. And now, I am officially not a teacher, but a student, and will be joining many of you for History of Magic very shortly." Everyone stood and started gathering their things, as Neville hugged Hermione enthusiastically. Harry looked at his hand and asked Ginny to come to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom as quickly as possible. Fawkes hopped onto Harry's shoulder.

"I thought you weren't taking History of Magic," said Anthony. "You didn't last year."

"Our new History of Magic professor, who's a friend of mine, made it a condition of taking the position that I took his class," explained Harry.

"Are you sure it isn't just because you'll be able to pay attention to the lectures without falling asleep?" joked

Parvati.

"That, too," agreed Harry. "Although, as I said, I can't condone making jokes about... oh, wait, I just said I wasn't a teacher right now. Never mind. And as a non-teacher, there's something I wanted to do..." As Neville let go of Hermione, Harry walked up to her, kissed her on the cheek, and hugged her tightly, noticing that he had to be sure to hug her with his head on the side where there wasn't a phoenix on her shoulder. "I am so, so incredibly happy for you..."

"I know," she said, returning his hug. "Thank you." Ron, Pansy, then a very excited Ginny took their turn, and they headed off to History of Magic, minus Pansy and Ginny. Arriving three minutes early, they took their seats. Harry noticed that it was a Gryffindor/Hufflepuff class; there were fourteen students, evidently too many for Snape to have combined the classes as he had for Harry. Harry sat in the middle of the room, with Ron next to him, Hermione in front of him, and Neville next to Hermione.

Dentus walked in a minute early, and stood at the podium. "Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Archibald Dentus, your new History of..." He trailed off as he looked more closely at Hermione. "I thought that was just a trick of the light for a minute. Hermione, is that a temporary visitor, or permanent?"

She beamed. "Permanent."

"Extraordinary," he said, clearly impressed.

"Congratulations. You must be... well, I can see that you are, very happy. Harry, would there happen to be a story behind this, that you could tell in the staff room after this lesson?"

"A very interesting one. I'll be there."

"Excellent, thank you. As I was saying, I'm your new History of Magic teacher. I worked for many years at the Ministry of Magic, rising to the position of Undersecretary while breaking as few laws as possible along the way." The joke was greeted with a moderate laugh. "That was a joke, of course, but not quite as much of a joke as I would wish it to be. I will be following that up in my lectures, as I will view history from something of a political perspective, due to my somewhat limited background.

"Another perspective from which I will view history is one having to do with current events. History, it seems to me, is useless if boiled down to a recitation of names, dates, and places, devoid of any context. You may pass a N.E.W.T. that way, but you won't really know much. You might be amazed at how many bright people I've talked to who got a History of Magic N.E.W.T. but had no sense of historical perspective whatsoever." He paused a beat, then added, "And that was just among senior Ministry officials." Harry and a few other students laughed, and Dentus wore a wry smile. "How I wish that had been a joke, but alas, it was not. So, my personal prejudice will result in my not teaching you in precisely the way that will result in your getting the highest possible score on your N.E.W.T.s, though you can get the proper information by reading, I should say, memorizing, the textbook. Yes, Ron?"

"You say you're not going to teach to the N.E.W.T.s, and Harry just said the same thing in the last class. Do you think it's possible that the way the N.E.W.T.s are given should be changed?"

Dentus chuckled along with the students. "Yes, that might not be a bad idea. Just curious, Harry, how would you like to see the Defense Against the Dark Arts N.E.W.T.s be changed?"

"I'd like it to be, a Death Eater leaps out at you, and if you stay conscious for five minutes after that, you pass."

Dentus laughed. "Utterly practical, I would expect that of you. Yes, I would prefer that mine consist of a student sitting with me for fifteen minutes and telling me some important ideas which can be gained from an understanding of history, and how they relate to the events of the time. As I said, names and dates mean nothing.

"For example, let us look at current events. I believe everyone knows now that Harry has recently developed the extraordinary ability to incapacitate Voldemort at will, with a spell which he wisely does not make public, for Voldemort would seek a defense against it. Voldemort's defeat is still hardly a foregone conclusion, but let us look ahead with optimism. We will suppose that Harry manages to defeat Voldemort, ending the Death Eater threat and the terror it brings, and causing Harry to be lauded, praised, and celebrated to such an extent that it will be, for those of us who know him and how easily embarrassed he is, highly entertaining to watch."

The other students broke out laughing. "Sorry," said Dentus, to Harry.

"No, you're not," responded Harry, with a hint of a smile.

"Well, a little," said Dentus. "As they say, it's funny because it's true. In any case, he would be the hero of the time, even more so than he already is. Statues might go up, awards given, commemorative Galleons issued, streets renamed, that sort of thing. Nobody born during his lifetime would not know his name. And as I speak, he is making plans to, if he defeats Voldemort, immediately relocate to New Zealand and live anonymously."

"It is very tempting," agreed Harry.

"No doubt. But I will get to my point, which is to have you consider the following question: imagine the distant future in this scenario, one hundred and fifty years after Harry's death. How will he be remembered in history books?"

Hermione's hand went up, and Dentus smiled. "Yes, Hermione, I have been briefed on you. I would like to ask you not to raise your hand from now on; if I want a definitely correct response, I will know to call on you." This got a chuckle from the class, and Hermione put her hand down. "Anybody else... ah, yes, Susan, isn't it? I know your aunt quite well, of course."

"Thank you, sir," said Susan. "She said that she hopes you'll be as good a teacher as you were an undersecretary, and that you won't have to quit this job in protest." Dentus laughed, as did Harry and Hermione. "My answer to the question is that Harry would just be a name. Defeated Voldemort, the time's most dangerous Dark wizard, what year it happened, Boy Who Lived, most famous wizard of his time, and that would be it. Students reading history books would learn his name and what he did, but wouldn't learn anything useful by knowing that."

"Yes, good," agreed Dentus. "After he defeated Voldemort, the wizarding world was safe again, and they all lived happily ever after. One would have to read a detailed history of that era to understand the particular significance of it. And every era has its own significance, whether anything exceptional happened or not."

"Now, let's look at Professor Dumbledore, another historically significant figure. For what would he be known in history books?"

Ernie raised his hand, and was called on. "Two things. One, his defeat of Grindelwald. Two, assuming Harry defeats Voldemort, being Harry's mentor, kind of a father figure."

"Yes, very good, Ernie. A connection between two important historical figures, history books like that. They get to link different eras. But what is the particular significance of his defeat of Grindelwald, other than that it made the wizarding world safer for a time?"

There was a silence, then Harry raised his hand. "Do you mean, what about it could be in a history book that would be useful for people to know?"

"Yes, exactly," said Dentus.

Harry was solemn. "That at one point before Grindelwald's final defeat, Albus tried to capture him instead of kill him; he got away and later killed twenty-two more wizards and many more Muggles, for which Albus felt responsible. That when Albus finally did kill him, he was depressed and suffered a major decline in his magical ability for some time afterwards. That he decided that killing was simply wrong, no matter the reason, and he based the rest of his life around that idea."

The whole class stared at Harry, including Dentus, who was clearly amazed and emotionally affected. "He told you this?"

"Yes," Harry said simply.

"Yes, Harry," said Dentus slowly, "that would definitely be useful for people to know. Historical figures often have major decisions to make, responsibilities to bear. Their decisions can cost or save lives, betray or protect principles. They can set the tone for their times, in ways positive or negative—and whether they are positive or negative may not be known for a long time after the events occur."

"Harry... you're sure he wouldn't have minded you talking about this publicly?"

Harry nodded. "I'm very sure."

"Then... not today, but would you be willing to talk about it in a future class?"

"Sure," agreed Harry quietly.

"Thank you. Now, what Harry said was an excellent example of what really is relevant about history: the choices people make when the stakes of those choices are as high as they can be." Harry suddenly remembered what Dumbledore had told him about life being a learning experience, and the afterlife being the true reality. He found that it gave him small comfort when he thought about the Hogsmeade dead, or Dentus's wife. He was sure it would have given Dumbledore equally small comfort when he thought of the twenty-two-plus lives he felt responsible for.

"Now, let me go back to my first question, when I asked how Harry would be remembered if he defeats Voldemort. Susan's answer was correct as far as it went, but not complete. Hermione, what is your answer to that question?"

Hermione was also solemn; Harry wondered if she knew what he was thinking because of what Dentus had said. "He'll be known mostly for the energy of love."

"Why?" asked Dentus.

"Because it'll have an enormous impact on wizarding society, both for its effect on how magic is done and for its effect on the people who use it."

"Yes, exactly, very good. If Harry defeats Voldemort, that will affect this generation, but not much more. If that were all he did, he would be a name in a history book, as Professor Dumbledore will be. But if the use of the energy of love becomes widespread—as it almost certainly will—then he will have done something that will have a profound impact on future generations, and he will certainly be remembered for it. It may be that his defeat of Voldemort would have more significance to this particular generation than would the energy of love, but we are thinking in terms of history."

Ron raised his hand. "Would it be remembered by history that the whole reason he came up with it in the first place was as a weapon to fight Voldemort?"

"A very good point. I suspect it would be an aside, perhaps a paragraph or a part of one. Now, in that situation, what Harry discovered would have had a huge impact on wizarding society, but it is questionable how much of use people would actually learn by reading about that. There is a well-known phrase which neatly sums up the value of learning history. Does anyone know it?" He scanned the room; no one raised a hand. "Okay, then. Hermione?"

"Those who do not learn from the mistakes of history are doomed to repeat them," she quoted.

"Yes, that's right. As individuals, we learn from our own mistakes, and hopefully, do not repeat them. As a society, history is our collective memory. If we ignore it, we will repeat mistakes over and over, generation after generation. This has already happened more than once. Not repeating the mistakes of the past is, in my opinion, the most valuable aspect of learning history.

"Another is one I made reference to earlier: the decisions, the choices made which affected history. Sometimes, what is and is not a mistake is far from clear. Value judgments must be made. Was an action, or the lack of it, a mistake solely because it had a bad outcome? History provides a context to make such judgments, and from studying them, apply them to current situations.

"A third important aspect of history is that it tells our story, so to speak; it tells us how we became who we are, as a society. It tells us how things got to be the way they are now. Again making an analogy to individuals, we each have our own individual history, with decisions and turning points. Knowing about a person's history tells a lot about who they are now, and the same is true for a society." As Dentus continued, Harry felt sure that he wasn't going to have any problems staying awake.

* * * * *

Harry and Ginny stepped out from behind the bushes in their favorite couples' place at ten minutes to six. "Now," she said humorously, "what were you going to say when I stopped you from talking by pressing my mouth against yours?"

Harry smiled and put an arm around her. "That was a good quote," he said, recalling the only thing she had said to him when they reached the couples' place. "'No talking. Just kissing.' Short and to the point."

"Well, we can talk anywhere," she pointed out. "We can't walk around and kiss. If we could, we'd be doing it a lot more."

"That's true. It wasn't anything so important, I was just going to tell you about my telling the teachers about

Hermione and the phoenix. They were pretty surprised, but I think they were even more surprised about Neville almost getting chosen. I told them about how he's changed. They can see it a bit, but not as well as we can, obviously."

"Yeah, Pansy told me all about it, of course, since neither of us had a class after three. I wasn't that surprised about Neville, any more than I was about Hermione. Neville may be less shy, but he's usually pretty calm and gentle. I can see why a phoenix would find him attractive.

"She also told me about Mandy asking about why she, Ron, and I weren't considered. I never would have thought of it, honestly, for any of us. I guess I always just think of you as the exceptional one." She grinned at him, then continued, "But I was thinking about it. Maybe Fawkes didn't want to say it this way, but I think there are reasons other than taste." He looked at her quizzically. "Think about it. In what ways are Ron, Pansy, and I different from you, Hermione, and Neville?"

He shook his head. "Really, nothing leaps to mind."

"Well, I had some time to think about it. Not being all frustrated because I wasn't considered, you understand. But it is an interesting question, and it says something about phoenixes if what I think is true. I thought of two things. One, on Sunday night after we fought off the mercenaries and you turned over the tank, you got mad at McGonagall for making you take the rest of the Hogwarts wounded back before helping them, even if it meant some of them died. Hermione agreed with you, and so did Neville, but the rest of us agreed with McGonagall. It seems possible that a phoenix is attracted to someone who would make the choice you would make. We know they're very peaceful creatures.

"The other one has to do with stuff you've been through. You and Neville with the Cruciatus Curse and LeStrange, and Hermione with Skeeter. You all did things that were really wrong, under incredible stress, and came to certain realizations after you recovered. Probably those lessons are learned really well from such a serious experience. Maybe a phoenix recognizes that, and is attracted to the knowledge that the person knows without a doubt they won't do that kind of thing again. The rest of us haven't been through that. We can learn from your experience, but it's not the same. It changed them, and again, probably made them more attractive to a phoenix."

Harry nodded. "I hadn't thought of the first one, but I actually did think of the second one in class, I just forgot a minute ago. I would have mentioned it, but obviously it's not the kind of thing I can start talking about in class. I still don't think Fawkes can give me a better answer than they seemed like the ones most attractive to a phoenix, but what you say makes sense, both of them. I assume you're not bothered, you don't seem to be."

She shook her head. "Like I said, I'd never even considered it. Now that I think about it being the case that using the energy of love makes it more likely... I don't know, it's not the kind of thing I have a special desire for. If it happened, of course I'd be happy, but... you have one, I guess that's enough for me. I have to wonder about Ron, though, how this is affecting him. You know how he is, it's hard not to think that deep down, he'd really like one. He'd be really proud. But I'm sure he was listening to what Hannah said, so he's probably trying not to want one. I really hope he's not bothered."

Harry nodded. "Let's walk over to the Quidditch stands, see if that team from the Ministry to get rid of the plane is here

yet, and we can look at the phoenixes. They should still... oh, that's right, I have to talk to Sprout about how much the phoenixes are going to eat. I know that Fawkes wants as many of them left there as possible, and I think Sprout does, too."

They started walking. "Funny, that Hermione wouldn't have been chosen if this whole lutas thing had never happened," remarked Ginny. "Things happen, and things you never would have expected happen because of them."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Like, Malfoy used that device to drag you down into the Chamber, and..."

"I like to think we would have happened anyway," she replied. "I don't want to think we needed Malfoy to help us along."

"You know what I mean. It's not like I'm giving him credit or anything. He did something horrible, and he's rotting in a cell where he belongs. Too bad the dementors left Azkaban."

"Funny to hear you say that. Albus never wanted wizards to have anything to do with them."

"I'm not saying I disagree with him," Harry clarified. "Just that that's what someone like Malfoy deserves. But, no, when I think of all those years Sirius suffered for something he didn't do, it's hard not to agree with Albus about that. Putting people in there is a kind of cruel punishment. But just because some people deserve cruel punishments doesn't mean we should do them. They were wrong about Sirius, they could be wrong about other people in the future."

"Too bad we can't just do it to the ones we're sure we're right about," she said, half-seriously.

"Yes, that would be good... wow, quite a few people out here," he said as they got near the Quidditch pitch. Some unfamiliar people were combing through the wreckage of the plane and the stands, and about forty people seemed to be watching them. Some people were flying; Harry remembered that this was the first day the magic was back, and therefore the first day that flying was possible. There were no Quidditch practices, just people flying for fun.

Then Harry saw something that made him stop and stare: all ten of his Slytherin second years on brooms, with Ron in their midst. What's going on here? he thought. He walked toward them and was soon intercepted by Pansy.

"Hi, Harry, Ginny," she said, smiling. "Have a nice time?"

"Very nice, thanks," said Ginny.

"What's going on?" asked Harry. "What's Ron doing with the second years?"

She gave him a serious look. "Could you two walk with me, we can go sit in the Quidditch stands. The ones that are still there, anyway."

Confused, he agreed, and they started walking. "Why do we have to sit down for you to tell me what's going on?"

"Well, it's a bit of a story, and I'd just rather tell you there. Also, people will know they should leave us alone if we go out of our way to sit someplace like that." Reaching the stands, they walked up and sat.

"Okay, Harry," said Pansy, in the manner of one about to tell a long story. "Of course you know I didn't have any classes after your class, while you were having History of Magic. I spent a while telling Ginny about the Hermione thing, then

the second years found me. Naturally, they pumped me for any details about your class. So I told them the story too, and then about the other stuff from your class, and what you planned to do. They were pretty keen when I mentioned the combat flying. Apparently, they think the castle will be attacked too, especially after what just happened. If it happens, they want to be able to get on brooms and join the fight. Not just ten of them flying all over the place, but as a unit, together. They know they're not that strong, but they think that if they work together, they can at least help. The fact is, I think they're right. Now, I know what you're going to say--"

"You mean, the little detail that they could all get killed?" asked Harry, sarcastically. "You're encouraging them? How can you do that?" Harry had to try to calm himself down.

"I'm not thrilled, Harry, and I understand how you feel, so I'm not going to get mad at you for taking that tone with me, as if you've forgotten that I care about them too," said Pansy, her tone a warning. "I'd rather they didn't. But I spent some time talking to them, and they really want to. They say they know it's dangerous, that they understand the risks. I know you'll say they really can't, not until someone they care about dies. Part of me agrees with that. But they also didn't hesitate to point out that you, Ron, and Hermione were doing equally dangerous stuff, maybe more so, when you were their age. They say, who are you to be telling them to stay out of harm's way, let the older students and teachers take care of everything?"

"When I was their age, I'd have been thrilled to let others take care of everything! The only reason we did that stuff was that nobody else was going to!"

She stared at him, seeming to see through him. "Yes, that's the way it happened to work in the situation. But if the castle had been attacked, are you going to tell me that twelve-year-old Harry Potter wouldn't have grabbed a broom and run out to do what he could? You tell me that, Harry, and I'll go back there and try again to talk them out of this."

Harry was silent, frustrated. He knew she was right, that he would have done exactly that, even defied Dumbledore to do it. He hung his head, staring down.

"I know how you feel, I really do," she continued. "I did try to talk them out of it. But they're pretty determined. They say there's nothing stopping them from practicing flying as a group if they want to, and they're right. They just want to do it right, as you said in your class, to know what they're doing. They know you can't teach them, that it would be favoritism. So they asked me to ask Ron to help them fly better first of all, then they can work on the combat part later. Like me, Ron knew you would have this reaction, so I was around in case you showed up."

"They know you'll be concerned about them, Harry. They know you won't like it. But they really do wonder how you can have that attitude when you would have done just the same thing. I talked to them about Hogsmeade, about how horrible you felt. They understand, as well as they can, but this is something they're choosing, not something that you should feel responsible for. Except, of course, in that your general bravery inspires them to want to do this. They don't want to think about the castle being attacked and them just sitting around being safe. I know you can understand that."

"Yes, I can," agreed Harry, very reluctantly. "It's just... well, I don't need to say it, you've already said everything I could

say. I'm just scared, Pansy. What if one or more of them dies? They're so young, there's a better chance of it happening."

"That may be," she agreed. "And there was a good chance of you dying, doing what you did when you were younger. But Albus didn't stop you, he let you do what you wanted."

Harry chuckled humorlessly. "As Neville won't let me say, I'm not nearly the person Albus was. He could let me run off and do those things—"

"He loved you, Harry," she reminded him. "Do you think he didn't suffer when you did all that stuff, nearly got killed? Of course, he did. I know you're not him. And remember, you're with the two people who were there that night when you woke up, after Hogsmeade. We know how you suffered, and I'd suffer too, if anything happened to them. But you have to accept the fact that they want to do it. You know that, you just don't want to admit it, because you're so afraid of what might happen."

Harry was silent again. Speaking for the first time in the conversation, Ginny said simply, "She's right, Harry."

He sighed. "I know. That's what's so frustrating." Looking at Pansy, he said, "I remember when I was having this kind of reaction last year, with Albus, about your safety. He said I had to honor the risks you wanted to take. Even though they're younger, this is kind of similar. You know how I worried about you..."

"I know. I feel bad for you, because I know. But they want to do this, like I wanted to last year. We're stuck with it. I'm going to worry, too." She stood. "Come on, let's go. We'll go talk to them, and you can tell them that you're proud of them, because I know you are. And you can tell them that you're worried, because they know you will be anyway, and

that it means you care about them." She, Harry, and Ginny left the Quidditch stands, and headed toward Ron and the second years.

That evening's dinner was indeed a feast, as the house-elves were overjoyed at having their magic back, and celebrated in the only way they knew how. Harry, Ron, and Ginny did some early evening flying after dinner, then came back inside and met the other three in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

Harry moved the desks out of the way, but as he was about to arrange the last six in the center, Pansy stopped him. "Harry, I have an idea. Why not just put all the desks to one side, and conjure a carpet, like you did for the first years? We'd probably be more comfortable sitting there than at the desks." The others agreed, and Harry did as Pansy asked. They sat down, Pansy saying, "Oh, yes, this is definitely better. You conjure up a nice, thick carpet, Harry."

Harry smiled, then looked at her curiously. "The rest of you could do that if you wanted to, couldn't you? I mean, I know conjuring is usually seventh year, but Albus was able to teach me pretty fast. There's no reason you shouldn't be able to."

"Except that we're not awesomely powerful," remarked Neville. "It's either that, or practice a lot. We should practice more, and of course we will get stronger, so we'll be able to do more soon. But you can just conjure up pretty much anything you want, so it's easy for you to forget that most of us can't. I mean, you learned that dog spell in, like, one minute. It's pretty safe to say that we couldn't do that."

"Oh, is Professor McGonagall going to do a cat spell, Harry?" asked Ginny.

"Yes, she is. I haven't been summoned with it yet, but a few teachers have, they were telling me it was pretty."

"Yes, it is," agreed Hermione. "Just after you went off to fly, she summoned me with it. It's really nice. She just wanted to congratulate me, talk to me about it a bit. She was really pleased, which was nice. She had already heard all the details, of course."

"Yeah, the teachers were telling me when Archibald and I got to the staff room after History of Magic," added Harry.

"Apparently the word had spread like wildfire, most everyone knew by five o'clock. Still, I told the story anyway, and they were pretty interested. Then I said I had to leave for an important meeting."

The others chuckled. "I'm sure they were fooled by your tremendous subtlety," joked Pansy.

"Yeah, well, I wasn't trying that hard. John just said, 'Tell her we all said hello, and we look forward to seeing her in class.' I said I would."

"You didn't, though," said Ginny.

"I tried to, but you weren't interested in hearing anything I had to say, if you'll remember."

"If you had told me before we got to the couples' spot, I would have listened," she said, as if it were obvious. "We have to have our priorities."

"Sorry, I forgot," he responded agreeably. "By the way, Ron, how did the second years fly?"

"Not bad, they'd obviously already practiced a bit over the summer." He looked at Harry hesitantly, as if expecting him

to say something. "Look, I know you'd have rather I said 'no,' but—"

"No, it's not your job to tell them what they should or shouldn't do," said Harry resignedly. "Turns out it's not mine, either."

"Just wait 'till we have kids," said Ginny sympathetically.

"I feel like they are," responded Harry. "I'm their father, and Pansy's their mother."

The others chuckled. "And yet, you're only five years older than them," said Hermione.

"They grew up fast," he suggested. "Must've been magic."

"I know what he means, I've felt that way too," said Pansy. "Here I had to argue him out of his reaction when I really felt the same way as he did, I just had time to get used to it. The second years already had to argue with me, I didn't want them to have to argue with Harry as well. But, Harry did very well. He told them he was proud of them, and didn't linger on the worry angle. They assured him they'd be very careful, which he pretended to be reassured by."

"I was there, he wasn't very convincing," added Ron. "Not that I blame him, I understand why he's worried. But I do think they'll be okay. That bunch knows how to stick together, and that'll help if something happens."

"I really hope so," agreed Harry. He knew he would worry, but he knew he could easily spend all his time worrying, so he tried not to think about it. "So, how are you feeling right now, Hermione?"

"Still wonderful," she reported. "It's too bad, you weren't able to really enjoy Fawkes like this, because of the crisis you were in, and you didn't really know what it meant to be chosen. I get to enjoy it, and it's really good. It's an incredible feeling."

"That's great," said Harry. "I don't suppose you've had any communication yet."

"Not that I know of. As you told me, she bonded with me a little at night, but not completely, since she still hadn't decided. I think I'm still at the stage you were at once where it's hard for me to work out which impressions are mine and which are from her. I think it was slower for you because he was still bonded to Albus as well. I'll probably have an unusual experience, because I'm her first one. I had never thought about companioning a phoenix before, but now I'm really looking forward to it."

"And, conveniently, you've already read 'Reborn From the Ashes,'" noted Harry.

"Yes, so what I need to know, Fawkes can tell me, through you."

"You know, Hermione," said Ron seriously, "I didn't have a chance to tell you this in class, but I'm really, truly happy for you that this happened. I think you totally deserve it."

She smiled blissfully in response. "Oh, thank you, Ron..."

"No problem. I just wanted to say that before I started in on teasing you about it."

The others chuckled. "I knew he was going to say something like that," said Ginny.

Hermione's smile didn't change, however. "He's not fooling me. He meant the first thing, and now he's just trying to cover it up."

Patting Ron's knee, Pansy said, "Why, that would be so unlike him."

"Damn, they have me figured out," whispered Ron loudly, as if to himself.

"Harry," asked Hermione, "why don't you have Fawkes come, they can be together."

Harry paused for a few seconds. "He wanted to let you two be alone, so to speak. He didn't want to distract her from you."

Ginny, Pansy, Neville, and Hermione laughed. "I guess we're going to have to leave if they start distracting each other," joked Ginny.

"I doubt they'd care if we were around or not," said Hermione. "I think humans are the only creatures who care about having privacy for that. Of course, they probably wouldn't do it if only because they'd know how embarrassed it would make us. Not to mention the thing about them only doing it if the phoenix population needs to be increased. Anyway, Harry, have him show up, I don't mind. He can ask her if she minds, but I doubt she does."

Fawkes materialized a few seconds later. "I guess she doesn't," observed Harry, as the two phoenixes seemed to look at each other for a few seconds, then turned toward Hermione. "Hermione, have you thought about a name for her?"

"Oh, yes, I've already picked one out. It just came to me, all of a sudden. I'm calling her 'Flora.' It's partly because it's a girl's name, partly because the whole reason she ended up here was that herb, which is a kind of plant, which 'flora' means, and a little bit because it starts with 'F,' the same as Fawkes. So if we're talking about them, we can say 'Fawkes and Flora,' it'll sound better." Hermione looked around to see what the others thought.

"I like it," said Pansy, as the others agreed.

"Very well reasoned," commented Ron.

"So, I was thinking," said Neville, looking around the room, "instead of that thing we were talking about where we have an open pendant channel to Pansy, we could just meet here to do homework regularly, couldn't we? I mean, I don't know if anybody's going to miss us in the common room, we usually stay in our group anyway."

Hermione looked reluctant. "Well, I am Head Girl, I should be there..."

"Yeah," said Ron, "but the fifth year prefects, what were their names... Jennifer, and... Dave, that's right... they're supposed to take care of that, right? I mean, you're the Head Girl for the whole school, not the Gryffindor common room. If anything, you should be patrolling the halls. Then again, I'm sure Ernie's got that covered." His expression clearly suggested that he thought Ernie was taking being Head Boy far too seriously.

"Yes, but I don't want to shirk my responsibilities just because he'll do them if I don't. But I suppose you're right about the common room. I would think we'd be able to do this sometimes. It is nice to be able to do."

"Are you sure, Hermione?" asked Pansy. "If you're uncomfortable—"

"No, it's okay," Hermione assured her. "I really would like to. It's just that, you know me, I feel like I have to do everything. But I can do Head Girl stuff other times. It's fine, don't worry."

"That's good," said Pansy. "I would like to do this, too." Moving over closer to Ron and putting an arm around his waist, she added, "There are some things about doing it this way that are much better than the pendants."

"But then you might distract each other from your homework," teased Ginny.

Feigning earnestness, Pansy responded, "If that happens, I promise, Ginny... we'll get up and go to Harry's office." Everyone laughed except, naturally, Ron.

"Oh, Neville," said Harry, "thanks for helping out Blaise in class. He looked like he was having trouble."

"That's an understatement," said Neville. "It's like he barely knows how to hold a wand. I wonder how he managed to stay at Hogwarts all this time."

"I guess Malfoy and the other same-year boys wanted a punching bag," said Hermione sadly. "They've always been so horrible to him. I can only imagine what they did to him in their dormitory, behind closed doors."

"Malfoy told me stuff sometimes," said Pansy, looking ashamed at the recollection. "I'm pretty sure you don't want to know."

"I'm pretty sure you're right," Hermione agreed. "I always wondered why he got put in Slytherin. I'll bet he wondered too."

"Me, too," put in Ron. "I always saw him as more of a Hufflepuff type."

Neville looked sharply at Ron. "Did you ever think that way about me, Ron?"

"No!" said Ron, defensively and unconvincingly. Neville continued staring at him. Uncomfortably, he added, "Well, yes. A little. But not after the end of first year. Dumbledore was right, what you did was brave."

"I'm not sure, but I may have had that thought too," said Harry, trying to help Ron out. "Does that idea bother you, Neville?"

"No, not really," said Neville. "I asked mostly because I had that thought, more than once, and well past first year. Especially since I was so interested in Herbology, and that's what Professor Sprout teaches, I felt like I would have been a natural for Hufflepuff. I haven't thought that since fifth year, but I thought it a lot before that. I just thought it was interesting, Ron, that you thought that about Blaise. It's like, Hufflepuff has this reputation as the place where you get put if you're not especially ambitious, clever, or brave. Being 'fair' isn't really a quality that gets you anywhere in life."

"I've always liked the Hufflepuffs, though," said Hermione. "I think they're my second favorite House."

"Mine too," said Harry. "Most of my non-Gryffindor friends are from there."

"You wouldn't pick Ravenclaw as your second favorite, Hermione?" asked Ron.

"Yes, I know, it seems like I should. But a lot of them are pretty snooty about being smart, like they're superior to the other Houses. I don't like that." Ron raised his eyebrows and looked at her. "What? I may be smart, but I'm not snooty about it."

Mimicking Hermione's voice, with a very superior tone, Ron said, "You're saying it wrong. It's '*wing-gar-dium levi-o-sah*.'" Harry winced, knowing Ron had said something he shouldn't have.

Hermione stared at him for a few seconds, then looked down, obviously very upset. "What?" asked Ron defensively.

"It's just that—"

Hermione cut Harry off. "Don't tell him, Harry. If a person says something really hurtful, they should at least try to figure out why it was, so they hopefully won't do it again."

"Look, obviously I didn't mean it to be hurtful," protested Ron. "I thought that was just the kind of thing we said to each other sometimes. I know you're not like that now, but you used to be."

"What you said was too close to the bone, Ron," said Ginny, violating Hermione's desire for Ron to work it out himself. "It was a bit like what she said to you in Hogsmeade last year, about you not having a girlfriend. We do tease each other, but there are some things you shouldn't tease about. Like, I don't mind being teased about how I'm all over Harry, but I'd rather not be teased about how I was about him when I was ten, because it makes me feel like an idiot."

"Or me, about how painfully shy I was," added Neville uncomfortably.

"I know how I was, Ron," said Hermione, calming down a little. "What you said was hurtful partly because of what happened after that class, what you said then. And, partly because it reminds me of what Skeeter said about me this summer. Both in general, and how I dealt with Neville, which I'm trying hard to change. It just brings up a lot of stuff."

Ron sighed. "You know, Hermione, you know that I didn't mean—"

"I know," she said. "I know it was an accident, like if you swung your elbow and hit me in the head by mistake. It's just that knowing it was a mistake doesn't make it hurt any less. I'll get over it."

"I'm really sorry," he said.

She nodded, accepting his apology. "I know that, too. Thanks." She looked down at Flora, then she changed her position, lying on her stomach on the carpet. Eye level with Flora, she talked to her. "Sorry, Flora, this happens a lot with me. I get upset pretty easily, I cry pretty easily. I hope you knew that when you chose me. This must all seem pretty strange to you, you've never felt what someone else is feeling before, and it's probably not fun when it's sad." She reached over and petted Flora.

After a minute's silence, Harry spoke. "She knew, Hermione. She's communicating through Fawkes. She knew exactly how you are, both from being around you, and what Fawkes communicated to her before. She knows that being sad is part of the deal, and the impression I get is that she thinks you should no more apologize for that than for being human. The other main impression I get is that she looks forward to

being able to communicate with you herself. She wants to be able to make you feel better."

Hermione smiled at Flora. "She does, already."

Hoping that the problem with Hermione and Ron was over, Harry changed the subject. "Neville, I mentioned Blaise partly because I was hoping you could work with him, tutor him in your free time. He could really use some help."

Neville was obviously surprised. "Why me?"

Harry, in turn, was surprised by Neville's reaction. "If you don't want to, that's okay," he assured Neville. "Pansy, how would you feel about it?"

Pansy looked very uncomfortable. "Um, I'd really rather not, Harry. I mean, I just think it would be better if one of the others did it, anybody but me. For Blaise's sake as well as mine." To Harry's quizzical stare, she continued, "I wasn't exactly nice to him either. I try not to talk about that time so much, or even think about it. You guys don't see me that way now, but you know how I was. I was never as horrible to him as Malfoy was, but bad enough. I don't think he's going to look at me as someone who can help him. I'm pretty sure that I hurt him worse than I ever hurt any of you."

"I'm sorry, Pansy, I didn't think of that," said Harry, now feeling bad that he'd asked. Ron moved closer to Pansy and put an arm around her.

"Harry, I wasn't saying I wouldn't do it," protested Neville. "I just wondered why me, as opposed to anyone else."

"I said on the Hogwarts Express going home in July that I wanted you to be my assistant. Did you think I was kidding?"

"Yes," replied Neville.

"Well, I wasn't. I didn't ask you instead of anyone else for any particular reason, just that. I know Blaise doesn't need expert-level help. I was just thinking of you as my assistant."

"I understand. Sure, I'll do it, I was just surprised. I guess I wondered if you asked me because I used to be like him."

"You were never like him, Neville," said Ginny. "You weren't that bad off."

"Sometimes I think I was just like him, and the only difference was that I was in a House where people were either nice to me or left me alone, and he was tormented by four sons of Death Eaters. I really do think that if I'd been in his place, I'd have ended up the same way."

"I think," said Hermione sympathetically, "that anyone who wasn't bigger, stronger, and could do magic better than the other four was going to have a very hard time there. It was just a very bad situation."

That's putting it mildly, Harry thought. "Okay, thanks, Neville. I'll talk to him about it, then let you know, so you can talk to him and find a time that's good. I don't expect that he'll catch up to where everyone else is, but if he can even get close, that'll be good." Harry wondered if Blaise's personality, and what he had been through, were as responsible as anything else for his lack of magical ability.

* * * * *

It was a very relaxed weekend for Harry, even though he had an Auror training session on Saturday, and an energy-of-love session with them Saturday evening. At Hogwarts, however, he had no homework to do, though he did spend some time

with Hermione on Potions, expecting that Snape would push the class extra hard to make up for the lost day last week. He did more flying with Ron on Sunday, had a session with Snape, spent several hours with Ginny, and visited Arthur and Molly at the Burrow for an hour before dinner on Sunday to talk about the events of the last week.

At lunch on Monday, Harry was asked by Pansy how his visit with the Weasleys had gone. "Fine, as I already told Ron and Ginny. They asked a lot of questions about Flora, they had read Hugo's article in the Sunday Prophet."

"I still can't believe getting chosen by a phoenix is such big news," said Hermione, Flora still on her shoulder, having remained there most of the time since Friday. She had been very surprised to receive twenty letters that morning from people who had read the article. "I mean, I know it's really rare, but is it all that interesting?"

"Must be," said Pansy. "But I think it's bigger than it would otherwise be, given your connection to Harry." Hermione nodded.

"Have you read all the letters yet?" asked Ginny.

"Yes, I only had one class this morning, so I was able to. They were generally nice. One woman, I couldn't believe this, remembered the Skeeter articles from fourth year and said I must have grown up, learned the error of my ways, so she was happy for me."

The others chuckled. "Wonder if she was the one who sent you the bobtuber pus," suggested Ginny.

"It wouldn't surprise me," agreed Hermione, rolling her eyes briefly.

"Anyway," continued Harry, to Pansy, "it was partly about that, and... oh yeah, I forgot to mention this to you two, but it turns out now that Molly's actually in communication with Dudley, through the internet."

"What??" asked Ron.

The others were surprised as well, except Hermione. "Well, of course, I explained to Arthur all about e-mail, and remember, Harry, you had that letter from Dudley with his e-mail address. I put it into the computer's e-mail program. Arthur must have found it, mentioned it to Molly--"

"And her mothering instincts kicked in," finished Ginny. "Were you upset, Harry?"

"No, but she was kind of nervous about telling me, so she must have thought I might be, which I guess I can understand. I think they exchanged a few messages over the weekend. Dudley's back at school now, but apparently he's been keeping informed about wizarding developments through those websites, I think that's what they're called, run by wizards. They've reprinted some Prophet articles, especially anything to do with me or Hogwarts."

"They really are taking those wizarding secrecy laws seriously," commented Ron with obvious sarcasm.

"Can't they be prosecuted for that?" wondered Neville.

"Those laws don't address the internet, since it's such a recent invention," explained Hermione. "It's kind of a loophole. I wonder if they're going to get around to closing it before it's too late."

"They even put up the pictures from the article, the ones that Hugo took," added Harry. "One of them, of course, was

the one of me shaking hands with the Muggle Prime Minister. Seems Dudley was pretty impressed by that, and my aunt and uncle were as well, Dudley told Molly. Molly sent Petunia the article, of course, with the pictures."

"You weren't mad at her for that?" asked Ron, surprised.

"I really don't care what she does, as long as she doesn't ask me to do anything. Besides, I completely expected her to. Molly knew I was speaking directly to Petunia in what I said to Hugo, so she figured I wouldn't mind if she sent it. So, evidently Dudley called home on Saturday and talked to both of them. Neither mentioned what I said about Skeeter's article, but both mentioned that picture. I shouldn't be surprised, I know them well enough to know that that's the kind of thing that impresses them. I know, it impresses most people, but them especially. Not that they suddenly love me or anything, just Dudley said it made an impression."

"So, I guess Mum's going to be in touch with Dudley, then," said Ron, shaking his head. "Funny world. But isn't that really dangerous, showing a picture of you and other wizards with the Muggle Prime Minister on the internet where anyone could see it? Isn't that serious evidence, proof of the existence of the wizarding world?"

As Harry expected, Hermione answered Ron. "No, it isn't. Muggle technology is getting very sophisticated, including with images. Using computers, you can make any image you want. I could make a picture of you shaking hands with the Prime Minister, and it would look perfectly real. No Muggles will take that picture seriously, unless they already know about the magical world. They'll just assume it was faked, part of the 'fictional' world these people create."

Ron nodded, impressed. "That's pretty convenient."

"Yes, it is, actually," agreed Hermione. "There could probably be a lot of evidence on the internet, and still nobody would know anything. Until, of course, something happened, which is the danger that John was pointing out at dinner that night."

Harry grabbed his bag. "Well, I'm off to the staff room. I'll see you four in Charms, and you," he said to Ginny, "I'll see at three for your first Defense Against the Dark Arts N.E.W.T. lesson."

Entering the staff room, he exchanged greetings with the other teachers as usual. Harry noticed that McGonagall wasn't there, so he assumed that she was in the headmistress's office. They asked about his weekend, and how Hermione was doing with the phoenix. Then Sprout asked, "Oh, you just had your first lesson with the first years, didn't you? How did it go?"

"Very well," he said. "They were really keen."

"Hmmm," said John, feigning puzzlement. "Wonder why that would be..."

"I had the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw class on Friday," said Flitwick, "and even there, they were asking about you. They wanted to know if you were a good student in Charms."

"Obviously just an excuse to ask about him, period," observed John. "What did you tell them?"

"I said that since he's using the energy of love, when it comes to magical subjects, he can be about as good a student as he wants," he replied, with a smile and a glance at Harry. "Seriously, you know that I always have the seventh years do the exercise of imagining a new charm and explaining how they think it would work. I think for him I'm

going to have to do it differently; I'll require him to come up with an actual new charm, one that works."

"I think the only way that's going to work is if you can convince me that someone's going to die unless I do," said Harry. "Those are the only times that I've come up with them."

"Have you tried to come up with others, in normal situations?" asked Flitwick.

"Yes, I have. It doesn't seem to work. I really am beginning to wonder if that's some peculiar aspect of the energy of love, that you can use any spell you want to if you need it badly enough. I mean, I can't think of anything else."

"That would be very strange," agreed Flitwick, "but as you say, the whole thing is so new, we can't know. It's understandable that you wanted to wait to teach it, not knowing so much, but the students aren't prepared to let you wait. What did you do with the first years, regarding that?"

"I had already told them about the background of how I came up with it, on the night of the fire, but they had more questions, and I answered them. It ended up basically taking up all of the class time. I don't know how they're going to do with it; I mean, some of them barely know any magic at all."

"Couldn't that be an advantage?" wondered Sprout.
"Couldn't it be that if you get them soon enough, that they start doing it that way more naturally?"

"I suppose it's possible," conceded Harry. "Again, one of the many things I don't know. It could take all my life to work out how this works exactly."

"I can think of less worthwhile ways to spend a lifetime," said Flitwick.

Harry nodded; he certainly could as well. "Thinking of new spells, that reminds me... Archibald, do you think they're going to make the Imperius Charm illegal?"

"Interesting question," said Dentus. "For now, certainly, I don't think so, not as long as you're the only one who can do it. To make such a law would seem too much like a personal attack on you, and I think the public estimation of your integrity is such that people will be confident that you won't use it without a good reason. I think nothing will happen unless people think you're abusing it somehow, or if large numbers of people learn it."

"Can your friends use it?" asked Vector.

"I don't think I could teach them, except for Hermione, since I use it sort of in conjunction with Legilimency. I should see if I can teach her, though. As for abusing it, I honestly don't think it would be possible to abuse it. I think the energy of love doesn't allow for doing something for reasons you know are bad. Well, maybe 'allow' isn't the best word. It's not that you couldn't, exactly, but that you wouldn't. You might be able to do something misguided, but not something that's deliberately wrong. I can see where they might want to make it illegal to be on the safe side, and I'm not sure I'd blame them."

"How does that work?" wondered Dentus. "I mean, I assume you don't stop having free will. Imagine that you suddenly decided to, let's say, have a shop clerk give you a few items on what he thought was a generous impulse. You know it's wrong, but it's not that wrong, as wrong things go. Is it really the case that anyone who used the energy of love would be

sure that they wouldn't do that? We all give in to temptation once in a while. Okay, it's been a while since I've stolen anything from a shop, but you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do, and it's a good question," Harry admitted. "I can't swear that what I said is true, of course, it's just an impression. I don't mean to say that using this makes you some kind of perfect person. Maybe I should just say that it might be possible to do something wrong if it was minor enough, and that as the thing you're doing becomes more and more wrong, it becomes more and more difficult to do. I can easily imagine a situation where a person starts doing wrong things, and eventually feels so guilty about it that they lose the ability to use the energy of love. I do know, at least, that it's possible to be able to use it, then not be able to."

"Did that happen to one of you over the summer?" asked Dentus, filling in the blanks of what Harry had said

Harry suddenly wished he hadn't said it, since it came perilously close to revealing information he didn't want to reveal. "Yes, but I don't want to—"

Dentus cut him off with a gesture. "I wouldn't have asked, Harry. I know it's extremely personal." Harry nodded, now feeling bad that he had thought that Dentus would ask.

As Dentus finished speaking, a white owl with brown feathers and a few patches of brown on its belly flew into the room, and landed on Harry's shoulder. As the teachers looked on in surprise, Harry turned his head to look at the owl. It looked back at him haughtily, conveying the impression that it disapproved of him, that he had done something wrong. Suddenly realizing what it was, he broke out in laughter.

"What is it?" asked Sprout. "Why isn't it delivering something?"

"It's from Professor McGonagall," explained Harry, smiling. "At the end of last year, I asked her if she was going to do a dog spell, and as a joke, I suggested that she do one where an owl would fly onto the person's shoulder and look at them disapprovingly. She said she'd probably do a cat, but she obviously did this one specifically for me, because of the joke. I think it's great."

The teachers were all looking at the owl. "That was sweet of her," said Sprout, "And she did a very nice job with it, it looks very good."

"Yeah, it's very pretty," agreed Harry. "Although I'm surprised that-ow!" he exclaimed in surprise and pain as the owl nibbled at his ear. "Why did it do that?"

The teachers burst out laughing. "The owl is to summon you, Harry," pointed out Dentus, still laughing. "I think that means you're not moving fast enough."

"Oh, right," said Harry, now seeing the humor in it. "Better go, then. See you in Charms, Professor." He briskly picked up his bag and left, the teachers chuckling as he did.

As he approached McGonagall's office, he was surprised to notice that the owl wasn't slowly vanishing, as Dumbledore's dog had. The door was open, and he walked in. Just after he did, the owl took flight, and slowly vanished as if flew through a wall.

"Good afternoon, Harry, thank you for coming," said McGonagall pleasantly. "Though you could have been more prompt."

"Yes, the owl reminded me of that. The teachers got a really good laugh."

Deadpan, she replied, "Excellent, that was what was intended. Please sit down." With a small smile at the humor at his expense, he did. "I called you here mainly to let you know that I had a conversation with the Minister of Magic earlier. The conversation touched on last week's events, and he wanted me to tell you that he recently spoke with the Muggle Prime Minister about what happened. Evidently Captain Ingersoll gave a full report of events to the Prime Minister before his Memory Charm was done, and Captain Ingersoll mentioned you most favorably. The Prime Minister was very impressed by what you accomplished, and wished to convey his appreciation that you managed to defuse the situation on Wednesday morning in such a way that casualties were avoided. He is quite aware, of course, that Captain Ingersoll's troops were at no less risk than the rest of us."

"He doesn't think we should have anticipated what happened?" wondered Harry.

"I believe the Minister of Magic apologized to him on our behalf," she said, "If he voiced any displeasure regarding that topic, I did not hear about it." She waved her wand, and Harry saw three cats form and trot off

Looking in the direction the cats had gone, Harry asked, "Should I leave when they get here, or...?"

"No, this is a brief meeting for all four Heads of House; I called you first because I had a private message for you in particular."

"And to give the other teachers a laugh," he amended.

"Yes, indeed," she agreed. "I had a feeling that you would linger to explain the owl to them, so perhaps it was unfair of me. Still, it was a difficult opportunity to resist. Albus told me that you made a nonverbal joke at Mr. Weasley's expense the first time you used your spell."

Harry smiled at the memory. "It got a big laugh in the common room, I heard."

"Yes, so you can easily understand the temptation." She paused as they heard footsteps, and Harry stood as Flitwick, Sprout, and Snape walked in.

"We left promptly when the cats came," said Sprout, with just a hint of amusement. "I didn't want to take the chance of being scratched."

Harry tried not to smile as McGonagall nodded casually. "A wise precaution," she agreed. "I have information for you as Heads of House. The remainder of the current Quidditch stadium will be demolished, and a new stadium built. I am told that the soonest the new stadium can be ready is January, so the Quidditch season will have to wait until then, and be condensed. The first matches will be held when the new stadium is open; the second, on the first weekend of April, and the last, on the first weekend of June."

"I understand," said Snape, "but the Slytherin team should still be selected now, as they will need time to practice."

"Practice where?" pointed out McGonagall. "There will be no place to practice, for any team. I admit that I had not considered your current lack of a team in this, so I will agree to reschedule the first match for one month after the stadium is completed, and to give your team priority in scheduling practices. There will be no Quidditch practices for any team until then. Students may fly, of course, but not

hold organized Quidditch practices, or recruit new team members. I believe each team has at least one opening, so no team will be complete until that time. You will so advise your house's prefects and Quidditch captains. Are there any questions?"

"I have a question," said Snape. Turning to Harry, he asked, "Professor Potter, I have been informed that last Friday, Mr. Weasley was flying with all ten of the Slytherin second year students. What was his, and their, purpose?"

Harry felt that he'd rather not say, but knew that Snape could just as easily have found out through checking his memories in a session. "They asked him to help them learn to fly in an organized way. They want to learn combat flying so they can join the battle if the school is attacked."

McGonagall's eyebrows went high. "I assume, I hope, you do not plan on teaching them."

"Of course not," he said. "I'm going to teach it to sixth and seventh years only. They didn't ask me for anything; they know that as a teacher, I can't do anything with them that I don't do with everybody. For now, they want to learn to fly in formation. I assumed that they'd try to learn battle flying after I'd taught it to others, try to get them to teach them." Probably Pansy, he thought but didn't say, not wanting her to be called in and have to answer questions.

Harry thought he saw a grudging respect in McGonagall's eyes. "Well, they can try to learn anything they want, but if the castle is attacked, I have no intention of allowing them to join the battle. If that happens, I will issue instructions to the fifth year prefects that all students fifth year and under will go to their dormitories. In the meantime, I will consider the possibility of asking you and Hermione to have Fawkes

and Flora assist in evacuating the younger students to safety. I applaud their initiative, but the risk is far too great due to their age."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry, truly relieved. "I didn't want to think about them going out there. They were pretty determined."

"They can be as determined as they wish, but it will do them no good. That will be all, thank you for coming."

Harry decided to go straight to Charms, though he would arrive ten minutes early. His plans changed, however, when he saw Blaise walking ahead of him. He walked briskly to catch up. "Blaise!"

Blaise turned around, startled. "Harry? What did you want?"

"Could I talk to you for a minute in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom?"

Nervously, Blaise said, "Um, yeah, okay..."

"Thanks, it'll only take a minute," Harry assured him as they started walking. "Are you having a good year so far?"

Blaise seemed surprised at the question. "Um, yeah, okay," he repeated. With a shy chuckle, he added, "Better than any other one, but that's not saying much."

"I can believe that," said Harry. "It must be nice to have a whole dormitory all to yourself."

"Yeah, I suppose," replied Blaise as they entered the classroom. "Good thing you're so hard to kill. The reason they're gone is they tried to kill you, and failed." He looked

at Harry, as if gathering his courage to say something.
"Harry... I'm really sorry."

Harry blinked in surprise. "For what?"

Blaise took a deep breath. "I knew, last year... I knew Malfoy was going to try to kill you, he talked about it. I should have gone to you and told you, but I didn't."

Harry had to try not to laugh out loud. "Blaise, I knew he was going to try to kill me, from September. From January, after Goyle, the whole school knew. You really shouldn't worry about it." Blaise looked unconvinced, but said nothing.

"What I wanted to talk to you about was the class last Friday. I noticed you were having some trouble with dueling, and I thought it was probably because you didn't take the class last year. I'm glad that you wanted to this year, but it might be hard to catch up. I was thinking it might be a good idea for you to have some extra help outside of class, and I thought maybe you could meet Neville, like once or twice a week, he could help you get caught up. What do you think?"

Harry knew he was fibbing, since Blaise needed help because his magic was so poor in general, not because he hadn't taken the class last year. Harry was happy to seize on it as an excuse, however. "Harry, I was thinking, I should really just stop taking the class. I'm nowhere near good enough."

"No, that's not a good idea," Harry contradicted him. "This is an important subject, you're going to want to be able to defend yourself. You can get better, and if Neville works with you, you will get better. He helps me teach the rest of our group the stuff we learn from the Aurors, and he's good at it. He can help. Please, just give it a try for a while."

"Um, yeah, okay," said Blaise yet again. Harry couldn't help but notice that Blaise seemed less than enthusiastic, but he hoped it was just uneasiness with the situation.

"Good, great," said Harry, now a little uncomfortable himself. "I'll talk to Neville during Charms, and he can talk to you afterwards to find out what's a good time for both of you. You do have Charms now, right?" Blaise nodded. "Okay, good. Well, let's go, don't want to keep Professor Flitwick waiting." Harry left the room, Blaise following.

Charms was with the Slytherins, though these days that only meant Pansy, Blaise, and the other seventh year Slytherin girls. Harry sat with his friends, as usual, and whispered to Neville about his conversation with Blaise. Right on time, Flitwick entered the room, but as usual, Harry didn't see him until he had climbed the small staircase behind the podium that led to where he stood so that he could see and be seen.

"Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to your seventh year. We will be doing some very interesting things this year, and naturally, they will be difficult. This year's class will require a lot of study and practice, even more so than before.

"Before we do anything else, I will be talking about your main project for the first part of the year. Many of the things you learn in the next few months will be applicable to it, and I want you to start thinking about it as soon as possible. First, let me ask around, to see who may know. Mr. Potter, do you know what the project is to which I'm referring?"

Harry wondered if Flitwick had deliberately called on him to give him a hard time. "No, I don't."

Flitwick nodded. "That's fine, of course; you're not required to know. If you had wanted to know, how would you have

gone about finding out?"

That's easy, thought Harry. "I would have asked Hermione."

Pansy and the Gryffindors laughed, Flitwick smiled, and Hermione gave Harry a humorous annoyed look. "Well, at least you know where the information is, should you need it," said Flitwick dryly. "Miss Granger, first of all, my sincerest congratulations on your recent good fortune."

"Thank you, Professor," said Hermione happily, Flora on her shoulder.

"You're very welcome. Now, what is the project to which I am referring?"

"The Ring of Reduction, sir."

"Yes, that's correct. I would ask you to explain it to everyone, but you could probably do it as well as I could, and then I would hardly be necessary, would I?" Harry glanced over to see Hermione's look of embarrassment.

"The Ring of Reduction," Flitwick continued, "is something that is not all that useful from a practical point of view; one could go one's whole life without ever seeing or creating one, and be no worse off. Its value is primarily in its ability to let you create an environment, so to speak, in which you can use charms you will learn in this class.

"Here is an example of one," he said as he Summoned it from a shelf across the room; it crossed the room and hovered in front of the class. "I will enlarge it for the moment so you can get a better sense of it." The main body of it was a cube, which before Harry's eyes increased in size from one inch in each dimension, to one foot. The cube was white, and the only other feature was three gold rings which spun

around the cube. The rings spun in a top-to-bottom direction at the rate of one revolution per second, so he saw three rings spin around every second.

"The name is somewhat misleading, since as you see it is really a cube, not a ring. The rings circling it serve no function other than disallowing entry to those not authorized."

"Entry?" interrupted Seamus, surprised. "We enter that thing?"

"You recall that I demonstrated the use of the Pensieve last year," explained Flitwick. "This is somewhat similar, in the sense that by entering, you view an artificial environment. In the case of the Pensieve, it is a person's memory. In this case, it is an environment created by the creator of the Ring. The main difference is that with the Pensieve, the viewer's true body remains outside, though he feels that he is inside. In the case of the Ring, one is actually transported inside.

"The interior is perceived as a cube, or a room with the shape of a cube. There are two possible configurations. The simple one is that of one cube-shaped room; the more complex one consists of four cube-shaped rooms. In its actual state, the one-room Ring appears to be one inch on each side, as you saw, but when one stands within it, it appears to be sixty feet on each side.

"The main point of a Ring of Reduction, besides Charms practice, is its artistic value. One creates an environment, and others can view it. For example, one common use of the Ring as artwork involves the creation of what could be called a three-dimensional painting. Such artwork, the most advanced examples of which can be found in wizarding art museums, is very difficult to create, necessitating very

advanced creative and magical ability. Later we will view a few examples, created by past Hogwarts students. For the most part, however, we will be confining ourselves to simple things. For example, beaches and sunsets are common forms for beginners. One can create an environment in which a certain spell or charm can be emitted at regular intervals, though one would have to be standing in just the right place to be affected by it. Only the most basic charms, however, can be set up in this way, and even that requires above-average magical power.

"Another common environment is a memory: a memory can be placed into a Pensieve and then recorded, as it were, in much the same way that Professor Dumbledore showed us images from Harry's dream last year. Professor Dumbledore owned a Pensieve, which now belongs to Harry; he has kindly agreed to allow it to be used for the purpose in this class if anyone wishes."

Neville raised his hand. "Exactly how do you get into one of these?"

"Thank you, Mr. Longbottom, I was just coming to that. Not just anyone can enter one, unless it is specifically set that way. Normally, the only people who can enter and view them are family members. Specifically, those with a strong blood connection to the creator of the Ring: parents, siblings, and children. Being a cousin or a nephew is not enough. If one is an adopted child; that too is insufficient to enter, no matter how close the bond is. But if one can enter, one can take along another person of any or no relationship. Actually entering is accomplished by tossing Floo powder onto the cube, and stepping on the cube while saying the name of the creator. If you take an extra person, you must hold their hand while doing this."

"Stepping on it?" asked Lavender. "Won't we crush it?"

"No, you cannot destroy them, not even with magic. We can pick them up and move them, but not destroy them. They can only be destroyed by their creator.

"Before we start working on how to create them, you will view the ones left for you. Most of your parents took this class, all, I believe, from me. I have removed their finished Rings from storage and brought them today. If your parents went here, you may view their Rings. For those whose did not, such as Miss Granger and Mr. Thomas, you should accompany someone whose did. If you view a Ring with four 'rooms,' you will see a vague outline of what will look like a door, straight across from your initial position; that will lead you to the second room. The third room will be found by proceeding to the center of the next room and turning directly left, and the same for the fourth. Everyone may stand and come to the front for their parents' Rings."

Harry and his friends stood. "So, how should we do this?" asked Ron.

"How about," suggested Harry, "you and Pansy see each other's, Neville and Hermione see Neville's, and... Neville sees one of mine, Hermione sees the other."

Ron shrugged. "Sure, sounds fine. Funny, he said it works for brothers, makes me wonder what Fred and George did. Probably you step into it and it turns you into a turtle."

"Wouldn't surprise me," agreed Harry as they stepped forward. Harry, Ron, Neville, and Pansy all moved back to their desks with two rings each. One of Harry's was only one room, while the other was two-by-two; Harry had thought that the larger one would also be shaped like a cube, but he realized that it was more a rectangle, half as tall as it was

wide and long, and that it was the equivalent shape of four one-room cubes put together in two rows of two.

"Let's do yours first, then mine," suggested Neville to Harry, who nodded and put the larger one on the floor.

"How do we know which one is which?" asked Harry.

Hermione leaned over and held her wand over it; a name appeared. "Lily Evans," she read.

"Not 'Potter?'" wondered Harry.

"You put your name on them when you make them," she pointed out. "She wasn't 'Potter' until later."

"Oh, right". Offering his hand in an overly theatrical gesture, he said, "Neville, if you would take my hand..."

"Well, okay," responded Neville in the same vein, taking it. "But only because Hermione said she wouldn't be jealous." Hermione laughed, as did Ron and Pansy, preparing to enter one of Ron's.

"Oh, I wish I had a camera," chuckled Hermione.

"Don't worry, we'll pose for you sometime," joked Harry. "Right, Neville?"

"Absolutely," agreed Neville. "Why, this is amazing! I can feel the energy of love flowing through him!"

Ron, Pansy, and Hermione laughed again, harder, so Harry decided to take the humor further. "Neville, are you sure that's my hand you're holding?"

"Oh, sorry."

The other three were now in hysterics, and the other Gryffindors nearby were laughing as well. Flitwick walked by, chuckling. "It's a well-known fact that two teenage boys can't hold hands without making jokes like that. You should have seen your father and Sirius, Harry. They made so many jokes that people were starting to wonder about them."

"I can just see that," agreed Harry. "Well, Neville, we could amuse our friends all day long, but I guess we should get on with it." Harry threw some Floo powder onto the box, and said, "Lily Evans!" as he stepped on the Ring.

In a flash, they were inside. Harry was momentarily disoriented as he looked around and saw the familiar sights around the outside of the castle: the lake, the Whomping Willow, and the Quidditch pitch. He looked around. "Pretty good," he commented. "Hasn't changed much, has it?"

"Everyone who comes back here seems to say that," agreed Neville. "Yes, it's good. It'll be interesting to see how to do this." He paused, then continued, "Um, Harry, he didn't say we had to keep holding hands once we were in here, did he?"

Harry laughed and released Neville's hand. "Don't think he did, no. I bet my father and Sirius did, though, and kept making jokes."

Trying not to smile, Neville shrugged. "Well, if you want to..."

Harry laughed again and patted Neville on the back. "Wonder if the energy of love affects this kind of thing. I'm sure I'd have been way too embarrassed last year to make jokes like this."

"I'd guess, probably not the energy of love itself, so much as the fact that you have to deal with embarrassment to get

there," suggested Neville as they started to walk around. "You talked about stuff in front of the whole school, in the Prophet. Once you've done that, holding hands probably doesn't seem like much."

"Makes sense. But it was never that hard for you, though, was it?"

"No, I guess not. I'm not sure why. Hermione's always said that was one of the big things she liked about me. Said I was 'just the opposite of Ron.'"

"I can see why she would say that. Ron's come a long way, though."

"Yes, he has," agreed Neville. "He still gets kind of weird about you and Ginny, though, which is funny since he really was happy about it. I mean, I know it's an act, but I kind of wonder exactly how much of an act it is."

"Well, it is his younger sister, who still isn't sixteen. And it probably doesn't help, from his point of view, that she's... very aggressive about that kind of thing."

"I guess so. Well, he'll get used to it." Smiling, Neville added, "That must be pretty nice for you."

"It is. I know I'm lucky that she's like that. But Hermione isn't exactly shy about that either, is she?"

"No," agreed Neville, who suddenly laughed. "I just had a funny thought... we'll come out of here, and Flitwick will say, 'Oh, I forgot to mention, everyone can hear anything you say in there.'"

Harry laughed as well. "Boy, I hope not. Next one?"

"Sure," said Neville, and they proceeded straight ahead toward the passage to the next cube, which grew more clear as they approached it. "I guess the door can't be seen from a distance so the illusion isn't marred by seeing this big door in the middle of somewhere it obviously isn't supposed to be."

"That makes sense. Wonder if anyone's ever gotten lost in one of these."

"There must be some way to prevent that," Neville assured him.

"I hope so," said Harry.

Ten minutes later, they exited the Ring, and were in the classroom, back to their normal size. "Well, how was it?" asked Hermione.

"It was good," said Harry. "One room was like a picture of Hogwarts, one was dark but had spotlights that followed you, one had a lit area where if you put something in it it would float, and one was a memory of her first day at Hogwarts—saying goodbye to her parents at Platform 9 3/4, a little bit of the train trip, and her part of the Sorting. It was interesting to see her at age eleven. So, you get to see my father's. Ready?"

He took her hand, threw down the Floo powder, and said his father's name as he stepped on the Ring. They were suddenly at the Quidditch stadium, watching a Quidditch match in progress. He looked up and saw his father, looking about thirteen years old, dive for the Snitch, and catch it. The crowd erupted in cheers, and his father was congratulated by his teammates. Very soon the scene shifted to another Quidditch match, and Harry saw a similar scene, this time obviously resulting in a Quidditch Cup win

for Gryffindor. The scenes took almost ten minutes, and Harry counted eleven Snitch captures and four Quidditch Cup victories. When the memories finished, they were standing in an empty Quidditch stadium.

Harry felt conflicting emotions. He couldn't help but admire his father's obvious Quidditch talent, but there was something about it that bothered him; he just couldn't quite put his finger on it. "What did you think?" he asked Hermione.

"He was obviously a very good Quidditch player," said Hermione.

"Yes, he was," agreed Harry, suddenly understanding his feelings. "That was the whole point of it-how good he was. I told you a little about that memory of Snape's I saw in fifth year. In that one, he was conceited and vain, he liked showing off. This is a lot like that, it's like his way of saying, 'look how good I am.' And of course you noticed that, you just didn't want to say anything."

"It's not necessarily vain to be proud of something you accomplished," she said, clearly not wanting Harry to think poorly of his father.

He couldn't argue with her; he understood that this one presentation didn't say everything there was to say about his father at age seventeen, but it fit in with the picture he'd gotten from Snape's memory. "Not necessarily, no. But one thing I know is, mine's not going to look like this."

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 13, Ginny's Birthday: A day that should be happy for Ginny is anything but; Harry and his friends have to consider a request from the Minister.

From Chapter 13: "All right, then," said Hermione, getting angry despite the presence of Flora on her shoulder.

"Everyone who doesn't want to be around for this, move to the back of the field. Then I'll move back, you move back with me, and I'll move forward again. You'll be out of the field, frozen in time, and at no risk from what I'm about to do."

Hesitation appeared on a few faces, but no one moved.

Abashed, Padma said, "Look, Hermione, it's not like we're all a bunch of cowards just because we're not Gryffindors. I just wanted to be sure you understood the risk to everyone of what you're going to do."

13. Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Ginny's Birthday

Realizing what day it was, Harry climbed out of bed with a little more energy than usual. It wasn't because it was Friday, though that was still his favorite day of the week, because of his seventh year Defense Against the Dark Arts class and his class with Dentus. His anticipation was because it was the twenty-eighth of September, and Ginny's sixteenth birthday. He reflected that though she was more than a year younger than the rest of the group, he didn't tend to think of her that way. She's mature for her age, thought Harry, and definitely more mature than I am. Despite all he'd been through, he still felt at times that he didn't know how to handle some aspects of his life. Thank goodness she's the one I fell in love with, he thought, not for the first time.

The curtains on Ron's bed were still drawn. Chuckling at what he was about to do, Harry conjured his dog, giving it instructions to lick Ron's face. The dog came into view, and only had to take a few steps to reach Ron's bed and jump through the curtains. Harry was soon rewarded, hearing Ron yell, "Hey!" followed a few seconds later by, "Very funny, Harry."

"I thought so," replied Harry, as Ron pulled back the curtains in annoyance.

"It's a very nice and friendly dog," said Ron sarcastically, in a T-shirt and trousers. "Now, would you please get rid of it? It's kind of hard to get my robe over my head with that licking

my face all the time." The dog vanished. "And the dog may disappear, but the slobber doesn't," Ron continued complaining. "How do you get it to do that, anyway?"

Harry had no idea, but wasn't about to admit it. "Part of the energy of love, Ron."

"The energy of spit, you mean," retorted Ron, wiping his face on his robe's sleeve.

"Well, whatever you want to call it," said Harry. Noting Ron's robe, he had a sudden thought. "So, do you miss wearing the Aurors' robes?"

Ron raised his eyebrows a little, as if wondering what had made Harry think of it. "Not especially. I mean, of course it was extra cool to wear them, but them saying it was okay was almost as good as actually wearing them. Also, my little bit of lifting a few weeks ago got me lots of attention, more than I need for a while. Quite a few first years, and a few second years, have looked at me like... I don't know, like I was you, I guess. Kind of hard to get used to, made me understand a bit how you must feel."

"But not enough to persuade you to stop making fun of me about it," said Harry, his tone making it a statement rather than a question.

Ron chuckled. "Yeah, right. No, not much chance of that. Of course, there's so much to make fun of you about, I don't really need any one particular thing."

"That's what I thought," agreed Harry. "But I didn't mean that getting attention was the reason to wear the robes, exactly, it's more the pride in being allowed to, like you said."

"Morning," said Neville, walking up to them. "Yes, I know what you mean. In the summer, sometimes I wore them just for that reason, even during the time when I couldn't do the energy-of-love spells. It just felt good to wear them."

They started to head out of the dormitory. "But that's not so much a big deal for you, Neville," said Ron. "You're going to be one, anyway. That could have been my only chance to wear them."

"Well, first of all, we don't know that—"

Harry and Ron chuckled. "Yes, we do, Neville," said Harry. "They started training you because you were the son of two Aurors, but they wouldn't still be doing it unless they were pretty sure you'd make it."

"Yeah, Neville, none of this being overly modest business," Ron chided him. "That's Harry's thing."

"Sorry, I forgot," said Neville, going along with the joke. "Anyway, the other thing I was going to say was..." He paused for a few seconds. "Now I've forgotten it." Harry and Ron laughed. "Give me a second, it had to do with... oh, yes, I remember. I was going to say, Ron, that it may not have been your only chance. There's no reason you couldn't become one if you really wanted to. I mean, if I could, you certainly could."

"Yes, there's a point," said Ron, pretending to agree. "Why don't I just go and say those exact words to Hermione, see what she thinks."

Neville shrugged. "Well, if you really want to suffer like that..." All three laughed as they climbed through the portrait hole one by one. "You know what I mean."

"They'd have to make the same exception for me for Potions that they've made for you," pointed out Ron. "I know you said they said it's possible, but I wouldn't want to assume they would. Besides, after you and Harry, are they going to have any openings?"

"They will," said Neville confidently. "Kingsley has said that they want there to be as many Aurors as there are qualified people. Apparently there have been over fifty at times before, though there are less than forty now. That's not a problem. Combining how Harry's taught you a lot of the stuff we've learned, and your experience at helping keep Harry alive, I think you'd be considered qualified."

"Hadn't thought of it that way, but I suppose I see your point," conceded Ron. "It's probably more rigorous than their training program. I'll think about it. And if I do it, I could study Potions with you, however you end up studying it."

"I assume they have contacts with private experts who teach people for them," said Neville. "Private experts who are, you know, friendly people. Or at least not determined to make their students' lives as difficult as possible."

"Are there any Potions masters like that?" asked Ron facetiously.

"I think there are a few," said Neville as they entered the Great Hall. Or, at least, who haven't been Cleansed, thought Harry.

They walked to their usual spots and sat down, the girls already there. Harry reached over and took Ginny's hand. "Happy Birthday," he said, communicating much more with his eyes.

"Thanks," she replied, looking happy. "You know what's the best thing about turning sixteen?" Pansy started to speak, but Ginny cut her off. "Not you, I know you know. I want to know if they know." Harry and Ron exchanged a blank look, while Neville smiled. "All right, Neville, what is it?"

"Only one more year until you and Harry can get legally married."

"Yes, very good. Harry, I'm disappointed in you for not thinking of that." Her expression made clear, however, that she was joking.

"Sorry, I thought we were already," he teased back. "Feels like that to me, anyway."

"Good answer," said Pansy.

"That's sweet of you, but it won't really feel like we're married until we can sleep in the same bed every night," said Ginny wistfully. "So I guess the birthday doesn't mean that much, just for that reason. I mean, legally, we could get married a year from today, but it wouldn't do us much good."

"I don't know, I kind of like the idea that we got married as soon as we possibly could," said Harry. "Probably not many people get married on their seventeenth birthday."

"Oh, some do, Harry," said Hermione, putting down the Prophet for a moment. "Not so many nowadays, but it used to be fairly common. Of course, that was in the days of arranged marriages. But still now, it does happen. I read about it in one of the books I looked at when I was helping you research the Joining of Hands."

Ron looked amused. "I guess we all know by now that if Hermione picks up a book, she has to read the whole thing."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," she retorted. "By the way, Harry, there's something that might interest you in today's Prophet. There's an editorial about the subject of keeping Death Eaters locked up, or the difficulty in doing so. You remember we discussed this subject a bit before Christmas last year. Since more have escaped since then, especially the thirteen on the night the magic went out, the editorial questions the ability of the Ministry to hold onto them. It suggests that stronger measures might be necessary; that's been talked about a lot before. But it hints... listen: 'If such efforts still prove unequal to the task, if Death Eaters still manage to escape despite our best efforts to hold them, we must face the fact that extreme measures may be called for.' Do you see what they're trying to say?"

"The Imperius Curse?" asked Harry.

"No, that was discussed last year," she reminded him. "That's one of the 'stronger measures' they're considering now."

Neville spoke solemnly. "It refers to killing them."

The others all looked startled, as Hermione nodded. "Is that something they might actually do?" asked Ron. "Who wrote the editorial, anyway?"

"We don't know, the editorials are unsigned," explained Hermione. "Professor Dentus has told me that Ministry people sometimes use Prophet editorials to float ideas anonymously, get a reaction to them, start a debate. This one will definitely get a reaction, at least from people who read between the lines. As for your first question, it sounds unlikely. It would be a pretty radical idea, which is why it's

couched in such vague language. There hasn't been an official death penalty for quite a few years. I mean, letting Aurors kill people in the line of duty is one thing, but the state committing the equivalent of cold-blooded murder is really another.

"Also, it's kind of problematical, image-wise. The Muggle government of Britain doesn't have the death penalty, and most, I think maybe all, European Muggle governments don't either. The Americans do, but the Europeans kind of look down on them for it, like they're uncivilized. Now, it's not that the wizarding community is going to worry about what European Muggles think, since they don't know about the magical world anyway, but it's just the idea that it looks that bad. Not to mention that it's like an admission of defeat, that we're so incompetent at keeping people locked up that we have to resort to this. It's really unlikely that this'll happen. I'll have to check in with Professor Dentus, maybe ask him in History of Magic today."

Ginny shook her head. "I'm all for strong action, but I think even I'd draw the line at this. I think it's safe to say, Harry, that you couldn't imagine supporting this."

"More like, I'd speak out against it," agreed Harry. "If we do that, are we really any better than they are? Well, okay, we are, but you know what I mean."

"Bit of a difference between killing killers and killing innocent people," pointed out Ron. "But of course, I understand the point, that it's just wrong. I couldn't disagree. I wonder how other countries' wizards keep them locked up."

"Other countries' wizards don't have to deal with Voldemort trying to free their magical convicts all the time," pointed

out Hermione.

"I can see the reason for suggesting it, of course," said Neville thoughtfully. "You kill them, and they can't be broken out and then kill other people anymore. And anyone who's a Death Eater is a killer, that's just a given." Harry's thoughts flashed to Snape. "Of course I'd oppose this too, I'd hate to think we'd stoop that low. We just have to do better at holding onto them."

"How does Voldemort find out where they're being kept, anyway?" asked Ron. "I know you said that thing about him finding people and raiding their memories, but I thought only the Aurors knew about Malfoy, Lestrangle, and the others they're holding, but Voldemort found out and tried to rescue them."

"Apparently a few people in the Ministry knew that the Aurors were holding people, just not who," said Harry. "Kingsley's told Neville and I that since then, they've moved the people they're holding and keeping the location very tightly held, even most of the Aurors themselves don't know. He implied, but didn't say, that they did Memory Charms on the few Ministry people that did know, to make sure that they didn't tell anyone."

"Which is illegal," pointed out Hermione, "but Aurors seem to be exempt from laws like that. Well, we shouldn't worry about it anyway, it's just a hint from an editorial. We should think about other things, like Ginny being sixteen today. I'm sorry, Ginny, that we couldn't get for you the gift we know you'd most want."

Grinning, Ginny replied, "You mean, to be in a room alone with Harry?"

"I couldn't think of much you'd want more than that," said Hermione. "I actually considered asking all the Gryffindors to stay out of Gryffindor Tower between six and seven tonight, and changing the password for that time. Everybody would have had to agree, which they probably would have, and it wouldn't have been against the school rules. But the problem was that the whole school would have known, and Harry would have been mortified at everyone knowing."

Ginny feigned puzzlement. "And you let that stop you because...?" The others, except Harry, laughed as she continued, "I mean, it's my birthday, after all, not his. I should get what I want."

"I'm sorry, Ginny," said Harry, half-serious. "I know you'd want me to have Fawkes take us to my quarters—"

She waved him off. "No, I know how you feel about that, and you're right, much as I hate to admit it. We can't just go and decide the rules don't apply to me just because you're a teacher. But boy, I hate being noble about this kind of thing."

"I can understand that," agreed Hermione. "I've heard that the lack of privacy is a common complaint especially of seventh years, who by this age are often in serious relationships." With a sympathetic look, she added, "I guess it's best to fall in love right before you graduate."

"I wouldn't change a thing," said Ginny, squeezing Harry's hand.

He squeezed back, then let go so he could continue his breakfast. "So, Neville, how's it going with Blaise?"

Neville shrugged. "Well, you can see in class, he's getting a little better, at least."

"Sorry, I kind of meant, how you're getting along, his personality."

"That's a harder question," mused Neville. "He's pretty quiet, obviously. When he talks, it's mainly because he has to. I've tried asking him a few casual questions about things, and he mostly gives one-word answers. I think it's just going to take time for him to get comfortable talking to people, if he ever does. I mean, it took me some time, and I had much better circumstances than him."

Harry nodded. "I guess that's not surprising. Obviously, I wanted you to help him because he needs it, but I suppose I was also hoping that it would bring him out a bit."

"It still may, it just might take more time," said Neville.

The owls flew into the Hall, and dropped their mail, as usual. Five pieces of mail dropped in front of Ginny, which was not usual. "Wow, five, that's more than usual even for my birthday. One'll be from Mum, of course, but I wonder about the other four," she said as she opened one. "Ah, this one is the same as you got, Hermione, signed by all the Aurors. That was nice of them. Here's Mum's, and these two..." She opened one envelope, then another, and reported, "These are from people I don't even know! Wow, my first fan mail!"

The others laughed at the idea that she would be excited about it, though they knew she was exaggerating for effect. "Won't be your last, I have a feeling," said Harry.

"I'll have to write back to them and say 'thank you,'" she said with raised eyebrows at Harry, who disliked doing that kind of thing. As she opened the fifth one, she glanced at the return address, and her eyes went wide. "This is from Dudley!"

The others were equally surprised. "Why would he..." wondered Harry, who then added, "And how did he know it was your birthday?"

"Mum," suggested Ron. "Either that, or that internet thing. I think those pages about us had our birthdays."

"Probably the internet," put in Hermione. "Remember, I got a few cards from people I didn't know as well. That must have been where these two got Ginny's birthday."

Ginny opened the card, took out what Harry could tell from the back was a picture, and looked at it in puzzlement. "It's just a picture of him, sitting on... Oh," she added as she started laughing. She looked up at Harry and said, "It's a little joke. He's wearing steel-toed shoes."

Now Harry chuckled as well, and explained the reference to the others. "Wonder if he bought them, or just borrowed them from a friend or something. It is funny, but at the same time, I don't fancy the idea of him owning steel-toed shoes. You know he's been the leader of a gang that bullies people, I'd hate to think he'd get tempted to use them on someone other than Malfoy."

"He may be growing out of that, Harry," suggested Hermione hopefully. "People can be like that when they're teenagers, but grow up, and realize it's not something they should be doing."

"She's right, I should know," added Pansy solemnly. "And he didn't seem bad at all when I met him."

"I hope so," said Harry. He wondered whether Hermione had been obliquely referring to his father, which only she and Ginny knew about. "It was nice of him, anyway. I wonder if

it's partly because you're now more like a family member to him, since he knows we'll be married in the future."

"One interesting aspect of that, Harry," pointed out Hermione, "is that it means he thinks of you as a family member."

He nodded. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but it makes sense. I guess he has changed, at least in that way."

After lunch, Harry went to the staff room, as usual. As he sat, John asked him to wish Ginny a happy birthday for him. Harry said he would, then wondered, "How did you happen to know it was her birthday, anyway?"

"I like to know when it's everybody's birthday who takes my class," John explained. "I asked the school to put it on my roll sheets so I can mention it to students whose birthday it is, or is coming up, but won't fall on a day they have my class. It's nice, because it lets their friends know, who may not have otherwise."

Harry nodded, impressed. "That's a good idea. Too bad we can't have parties, but we'd be having one a day if we did it for everybody."

"How's it going with your classes?" asked Sprout.

"I assume you mean, the energy-of-love parts," clarified Harry. "It's way too early to tell, really. We probably won't start to know anything for a few months at least, more like half a year is more likely."

"I asked because I've heard that in Hufflepuff, a few 'study groups' have started," explained Sprout. "I think a group of fifth-year girls started one, and another one was started by

third-year girls. They're letting the boys join them, or at least those who seem to take it seriously."

"I haven't seen anyone not taking it seriously," said Harry. "Maybe not everyone does, but there hasn't been any smirking or joking. You know how it would normally be for people this age, they'd be making all kinds of jokes. But in each class's first lesson, I asked them not to, and I told them it would be much less likely to work if they did. They seem to be taking what I said seriously."

"Well, you are the expert," Sprout half-joked. "People wouldn't be trying to do this in their free time if they weren't serious about it, so I'm not surprised that they're doing what you tell them. It'll be interesting to see how it works."

"Oh, Harry," said Dentus, "I don't know if Hermione saw the editorial in—"

"She saw it, and understood what they were talking about. She said she might ask you about it in class."

Dentus nodded. "I could easily do several classes just on the history of capital punishment. I mentioned it because it seems like the kind of thing you'd have a strong opinion about."

"I'd think most people would," said Harry.

"Yes, but maybe not the one you'd think," said Dentus. "Especially at a time like this, that kind of thing has a certain appeal. As Bright said to you, you tend to operate on a rather strong sense of what's right and wrong. You may find that for many people at least, that can be flexible, depending on the situation. It may turn out that you are one of those people, and there would be nothing wrong if you were. Albus wasn't flexible about this kind of thing, as you

know; we both think he disapproved of the ARA despite the obvious advantages because he felt it could lead to abuse. In other words, that it was wrong for the government to take away people's liberties in any way. If it was wrong, it was wrong, and that was that. Now, capital punishment seems like, and is, a very different issue, but as the situation becomes more dire, more and more people may be open to it. Whoever is responsible for the editorial is anticipating a time when people will be open to it, and softening the ground for it."

Harry shook his head. "I obviously can be a little flexible, since I wasn't ready to risk my friends over principle last year. But I know I can't be this flexible. We just have to do a better job of keeping them locked up. I'd do something to help if I could."

"Ah, but there's the problem," pointed out Dentus. "You're far too valuable to use like that, even if you didn't have responsibilities at Hogwarts. That's why the Aurors don't want to guard prisoners, and they have an excellent point." As Dentus spoke, Harry realized that he was one of the very few who knew that the Aurors did in fact guard some prisoners. "It's just a waste of their talent to use them for that, except when someone manages to break a dozen out. And if they use ordinary wizards, even well-trained ones, there's a much greater risk that an assault can get them out. Part of the problem is that no one really wants to guard prisoners. It's an incredibly boring job, not to mention dangerous and highly stressful. It's not going to attract the best possible people, to put it mildly."

Harry pondered this for a minute. "If I pushed Bright to devote more resources to the problem, do you think he'd do it?"

"Honestly, Harry, I don't know. Strictly from a political point of view, this is always a hard thing to get politicians to do. They'd always rather spend resources where it'll get them the most political support, and things like that are way down on their list. But it is a security issue, and that has a lot of resonance right now. It partly depends on whether you pushed him publicly or privately. He wouldn't mind if you did it publicly, provided you gave him advance notice so he could be ready."

"But wouldn't that just give him a better opportunity to obstruct what Harry wants, if that's what he's inclined to do?" wondered Sprout.

"If he's inclined to obstruct Harry, there's little chance Harry would succeed anyway, for something like this," responded Dentus. "But to answer your question, it's a question of what kind of relationship Harry wants to have with him. Letting him know is a kind of political courtesy, and Bright would respond with the courtesy of letting Harry know his intentions. If you want to have a working relationship, there are rules, and these are some of them. But also, Harry, you're going to want to talk to Kingsley about this, find out where the Aurors stand. They could be more flexible than you, and you're probably not going to want to get out too far ahead of them, at least publicly."

"I can't imagine they'd approve of this," said Harry.

"Probably not, but at least you're going to want to find out, make sure."

Harry sighed. "Yes, I suppose that's a good idea. It's just that... well, never mind, you know what I'm going to say anyway."

Dentus nodded sympathetically. "Yes, you don't like the idea of having to have meetings with people you like to work out political strategy, or your response to an issue. The problem is, of course, that that's the price of influence. You could just stay out of it, but then you couldn't affect what happens, and something you don't like might happen."

"I guess... tell me, Archibald, what do you think Albus would have done in this situation?"

"You could always ask him," said Dentus humorously, "but I'm pretty sure I know. If asked, he'd have just said publicly what he thought, and not concerned himself with whatever result it had. As a result of that, of course, his influence was less than it could have been. One could even argue that if he had hoarded his influence and worked more within the system than outside of it, more people would have taken him seriously when he said that Voldemort was back. The rest of the Ministry wouldn't have been so quick to attack him, even if Fudge was. Albus consistently stood on principle, though, even when it would have served him better over the long term to be a bit flexible on things that weren't so important. Maybe he just felt that once you got caught up in compromising, there was no end to it. I don't know, maybe you should ask him."

"I'm pretty sure he's way past caring about politics now, but he'll answer my questions about why he did stuff, what he was thinking. I probably will ask him, thanks."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know what he says," added Dentus. Harry assured him that he would.

"Okay, that's good," said Harry to his seventh year class an hour later, having nearly finished the part of the class devoted to the energy of love. "The last thing I want to talk

about before we move on today is hugging. The impression I got when I was developing this was that hugging was very helpful. Of course, I got hugged out of the Cruciatus Curse every morning while it happened, but even besides that, I was hugged during that time by Hermione, Ginny, Pansy, and Professor Dumbledore. And I also hugged Professor McGonagall." To his amusement, there were impressed and astonished looks from most of the class.

"How did that happen?" asked an amazed Parvati.

"I don't think she wants me relating the details," Harry replied. "It was only very reluctantly that she allowed me to tell you this at all."

"That, I believe," said Dean. "How did she react when you did? I have this mental image of her slapping you..." Most students laughed.

Smiling, Harry said, "She was kind of taken aback, but after a second, she hugged me back. I'm sure she would want me to tell you, though, that the circumstances were extremely unusual, and nobody should get the idea that they can walk up to her and hug her."

"I don't think she has anything to worry about," cracked Seamus.

"Anyway, getting back to what I was saying, I really think it helped. I feel like... I don't know if I can put it into words well, but it encourages the feeling that we're trying to work towards here. But a word of caution, you should only do it if you feel comfortable. I don't want people hugging people because they feel like they should. It has to be because you want to. Now, if you have affection for the person but just feel embarrassed about hugging, then I would suggest you do it anyway, if you can overcome your embarrassment. If

you don't feel like you can, don't worry about it, just give it some time. Anyway, if anyone would like to hug someone to get used to the idea, I'd be happy to hug anyone who would like one."

There was some nervous laughing. "This has to be the strangest in-class activity ever at Hogwarts," said Seamus.

"It may not be, by the time the year is over," responded Harry, drawing a few chuckles. Hannah stood, saying, "I'll take one." Harry smiled as he walked over to hug her tightly. As he did, Susan asked, "Ginny has approved of all this?"

Harry responded, "She said she was fine with anything that didn't involve kissing on the lips." He let go of Hannah, who smiled at him and sat.

To Harry's surprise, Mandy stood. She met him halfway for her hug; as she returned to her seat, Ernie said, "So, this is mainly for the female students, right?"

"Stand up, Ernie, and you'll find out," responded Harry, to laughter. Ernie blushed and remained in his seat. "No, anyone is welcome. I can understand why the guys would be reluctant, though. It's a bit hard to get used to, and I don't expect everyone to—" He interrupted himself as Justin stood up. "Justin! Great, it's good to have a male volunteer."

He walked over and hugged Justin, who said, "I know you said not to make jokes, but it's kind of difficult right now."

Harry chuckled as he let go of Justin. "I know how you feel; in the first Charms class, Neville and I were making all kinds of jokes about holding hands. Now, I don't expect everyone to run around hugging everyone, and that might be taking it too far anyway. It should be someone you at least like, not just someone you barely know as a class exercise. The main

point is, it's a good thing to get in the habit of doing, as far as helping getting the energy of love going. And the offer stands, even if we're not in class.

"Okay, now we're going to resume working on dueling. First of all, I want to demonstrate a few things. Neville, would you come up here, please?" Neville stood and walked toward Harry, but instead of stopping at the normal dueling distance, he continued approaching Harry. He wrapped Harry in a hug, to loud laughter from the class. Laughing, Harry hugged Neville back, and said, "That's fine too, Neville, but I wanted to demonstrate dueling," as Neville released him.

"Oh, dueling," said Neville innocently. "Sorry, I must not have been paying attention for a minute."

"Actually, that could be a nice dueling custom," joked Harry. "We hug before we duel. Anyway, everyone watch carefully what happens at the end of the duel." They did their demonstration, and Neville sat back down with Harry's other friends on the right side of the room, from Harry's perspective.

"Now, as you saw, I-ow!" Harry exclaimed as he felt a sharp pain in his neck. "What was that?" he asked no one in particular as he looked around. He suddenly saw what looked like a small swarm of insects, perhaps wasps, on his left heading towards him; they seemed to be moving incredibly fast. Reflexively, he moved to his right, away from them, but they were almost on top of him. He suddenly felt very weak, and started to topple over. As he did, he saw Hermione reach for her neck...

* * * * *

Hermione moved the toggle on the small device around her neck. From her seat three rows back, the pocket of time extended to the front row of students, but not to Harry. "Thank goodness," she breathed. "I was afraid he'd be caught in this as well, and it wouldn't do any good."

Half of the class was caught in the pocket; the other half seemed frozen at their desks, like statues. Harry was frozen, in mid-fall. Hermione could hear startled exclamations of "What's going on?" from a few people.

"Listen to me," announced Hermione in a loud voice as she stood. "I just used a device Harry and I took from Voldemort when we faced him in June. It stops time everywhere except within a certain distance of the device. Harry's life is under threat. He's already been bitten, or stung, by whatever those things are. The fact that there's so many of them, and they all seem to be after him, can't be a coincidence. This is an attempt on his life, and so those things are probably deadly. We have to figure out what to do, and quickly."

Hermione ignored the startled gasps as Ron turned in his seat toward her. "Voldemort said that lasted two hours, right?"

"Yes, but I don't want to bet Harry's life on him being right. We have to act as if every second counts, that this could stop at any time. First, we need to figure out exactly what these things are. Can anyone get a good look?"

Justin turned in his seat at the front of the class. "They look like wasps, but not any kind I've seen before. They have this greenish tint to them. They also moved really fast, but in a strange way. I don't know how to explain it, it just seemed... unnatural."

"I wish I could get closer, for a better look," said Hermione, frustrated, "but if I do, the field will move with me and activate all the wasps, not to mention Harry if I'm not careful."

"Couldn't you leave the device at the desk, move forward without it?" asked Ron.

She shook her head. "We don't know anything about how the device works. For all I know, it could require the person to be wearing it, and time could start again if I took it off. I can't risk that." She paused for a second, thinking. "I'm going to have to move to the center of the room, and then forward very slowly, until one of the wasps comes within the field. Then we have to capture it, so we can figure out exactly what it is."

"Wait a minute," protested Padma. "You're going to let a deadly wasp come at us? Does anyone else see the flaw in this plan?"

"We need one!" Hermione almost shouted. "The rest of you, stay back. Ron, Pansy, Neville and I will stay here. If it attacks anyone, it'll be one of us."

"We don't know that," countered Padma. "Justin said it moved really fast. It could be on any of us before we know it."

"All right, then," said Hermione, getting angry despite the presence of Flora on her shoulder. "Everyone who doesn't want to be around for this, move to the back of the field. Then I'll move back, you move back with me, and I'll move forward again. You'll be out of the field, frozen in time, and at no risk from what I'm about to do."

Hesitation appeared on a few faces, but no one moved. Abashed, Padma said, "Look, Hermione, it's not like we're all a bunch of cowards just because we're not Gryffindors. I just wanted to be sure you understood the risk to everyone of what you're going to do."

Hermione nodded. "Believe me, I do. There's just no other choice. Harry's the one who's going to defeat Voldemort, he can't die. But the rest of you should get behind the four of us anyway, I'd rather we had a clear field of vision."

"The three of us," corrected Ron. "We need to be in front of you, Hermione. You can't be risked right now, you're the one with the thing around your neck. If you go down, we could lose the field, and Harry."

She thought for a second. "All right, much as I hate to admit it, you're right. Whoever sees it should do the Full-Body Bind on it, no reason it shouldn't work on an insect." Ron, Neville, and Pansy stepped in front of Hermione, who then slowly moved to her right; Justin and Padma moved chairs out of her way, and explained what was happening to the startled students Hermione was activating as she moved. "Neville, how far forward do I have to go to activate the nearest one?"

Neville took a few steps forward. "Hard to say for sure, since we can't see the border of the effect, but I think about six inches should be safe, so you wouldn't activate Harry or any other insects. Just go forward at about an inch a second, very slowly." He stepped back, resuming his place between Ron and Pansy.

"Okay, I'm going to start moving. Be ready." The other three affirmed their readiness, and Hermione started forward ever so slowly. After she had moved forward four inches, suddenly there was movement. One of the wasps moved toward them,

then seemingly instantaneously, was almost on top of Neville, an inch from his face. Ron and Pansy's wands flashed within less than a second of each other, Ron's first. The wasp went still and fell to the floor, after which Neville's arms went to his sides and his legs came together. He started to topple forward as Pansy caught him.

"Oh, Neville!" she cried. "Oh, no..."

Being careful not to move, Hermione waved her wand, and Neville returned to normal. Off balance from having been about to fall forward, he reflexively grabbed Pansy's shoulders. "Neville, I'm so sorry," said Pansy, holding his shoulders and steadying him.

"Ah, yes, I hadn't forgotten what that's like," said Neville wryly. "Thankfully, it was for a much shorter time, this time. Don't worry about it, Pansy. I could see it was really close to me, it would be easy to miss."

As Pansy let go of Neville, Hermione handed Ron a tissue. "Pick it up, as carefully as you can." With slightly raised eyebrows, he took the tissue, then pointed his wand at the wasp on the floor; it rose up to Ron's eye level, and he let it fall onto the tissue. "Or, you could do that," Hermione said, annoyed that she hadn't thought of it.

"It really is green, isn't it," remarked Ron. "I've never seen that before, either."

"All right, we have to know what we're dealing with," said Hermione. "The next step is to go to the library and do some research, as fast as we possibly can. Let's see..." She looked around the room. "Mandy, Anthony, I want you to come with me."

"Why them?" asked Ron, seemingly hoping to have gone with her.

"Time is critical, Ron," she replied. "We need to find out about this as fast as possible. We could take him to St. Mungo's and hope they know what this is, but I won't take that chance. I need people who can look through unfamiliar books and find information very quickly. But before we go, everyone but Ron, Pansy, and Neville should leave, in case the device fails and time starts again unexpectedly. Everyone stay around me, I'll move closer to the door and gather in the people frozen now, though there'll be no time to explain it to them, we just have to move them out, tell them it's urgent. Mandy, Anthony, stay with the others for a second."

After Hermione finished evacuating the class, she came back in, activating the five remaining students. "Weird sensation," commented Ron. "It's like everybody just disappeared."

"Okay," said Hermione. "You three... if time starts again while I'm gone, which I pray it won't, react as fast as you can, grab him, summon Fawkes, and get him to St. Mungo's. Ron, you're the strongest, you should be the one to actually grab him. If everything goes all right, I'll be back in what'll be an instant to you, with a better idea of what to do. After we finish, I'll take Mandy and Anthony to McGonagall's office, they can tell her what happened when time starts again. I'll be right back."

Mandy and Anthony held onto Hermione, who grabbed Flora's tail and was off. Sure enough, to the others' eyes an instant later, Hermione was back, now with Ginny in tow. Ginny looked at Harry's frozen form with obvious dread.

Hermione filled Ginny in on what had happened until she had gone to the library, then continued for the others' benefit as well, speaking briskly. "Fortunately, we found it in the library pretty quickly, less than five minutes. It's a rare type of insect that's the result of violations of the Ban on Experimental Breeding: a wasp that has a few very nasty qualities. One is that not only does it fly, but it also teleports very short distances, like a few feet. Enough to get from room to room, which is why they got in here without the door being open, and that's why they seemed so fast. Also, and this is what they were bred for, if they get a whiff of someone's blood they go for that person, to the exclusion of others. That's why they were all going for Harry, they were primed to home in on him. How they managed to smell his blood is something we'll have to worry about later.

"The worst part is that it's fatal, at least so far as is known. The books we saw related cases where a person got exposed to this kind of venom and survived, but only because they got medical care instantly, and blood transfusions from a brother or close relative with the same blood type. Family connections usually don't matter when it comes to blood in this way, but for some reason, it matters with this. Now, the problem is, Harry obviously doesn't have anyone like that, so we need the person most closely connected to him by blood and who has the same blood type. And that would be..." She trailed off unhappily.

"His Aunt Petunia," groaned Ron. "Peachy. She'll be thrilled."

"And that's assuming she's the same type as him, which isn't so likely," said Hermione. "After that is Dudley, who would do it, but it wouldn't be as good as his mother, since his blood connection to Harry is only half of hers. But we need to try to get her, if her blood type is the same."

"Is that something we can find out?" asked Pansy. "And how will we know hers?"

"I found out his, it's type A. After I took Anthony and Mandy to McGonagall I went to the infirmary, and had Madam Pomfrey look it up. As for hers, I'll have to ask her.

"The other part of this plan is that as soon as time resumes, we get Fawkes to where Harry is, and he'll drop a tear or two onto where Harry got stung. That should help, even for something that's normally deadly. I'm praying that the combination of that and a fast blood transfusion will do it. Once time resumes, Harry will have very little time. Normally, he wouldn't have a chance at this point. Before we go, though, we have to get him to St. Mungo's. I'll get just close enough to him to activate him, then Flora will take us there. I'll get away from him fast, find a Healer, and explain it to them. Then I'll come back here." Flora took flight, ready to go. "Ron, Neville, grab Harry and throw him onto me. I'll be back in a flash."

They did, and she was. "They have him, and two Healers are there and know what to do. They'll be ready as fast as they can for whoever we bring. Hold on, Ginny. Next stop, Privet Drive."

"We're all going," countered Ron.

"No," said Hermione urgently. "Ron, Petunia's going to react very badly to this. The more people 'invade' her home, the worse she'll react, we have to do this with the minimum number of people. Me, because I'm wearing this, and Ginny because..." Hermione paused, clearly trying to hold back potential tears, "...because Petunia needs to see the face of the person who'll be hurt the worst if Harry dies."

Ginny nodded somberly. "I'm ready."

Hermione turned to her. "Whatever you do, don't yell, don't argue, no matter what awful things she says about us or Harry. She's not going to like this, we need to persuade her."

Ginny nodded again. "I understand."

"Okay, where do you three want to be when time starts again? I should get you there now, wherever that is."

"We should stay here," offered Ron. "Get rid of the rest of these." Neville and Pansy nodded in agreement.

"That's awfully risky," pointed out Hermione. "Just because they were looking for Harry doesn't mean they won't sting anyone else once he's gone. We didn't find that information in the books, we stopped reading when we got what we wanted."

"And if we're not here, what's going to happen?" asked Neville. "They're just going to spread though the school, randomly stinging people. Dozens could be killed. If things go right and that thing lasts long enough, after Harry's set up, you can go to the Ministry and get some people here who're experienced in this kind of thing. We can probably take out all of them, but... I admit I don't like it, but it's better than the alternative. We'd just better hope that thing lasts long enough."

With obvious and deep reluctance, Hermione nodded.

"Okay, get ready. If all goes well, the next thing you'll see is me with people experienced with dealing with dangerous insects. Ginny, let's go." Ginny held onto Hermione, who grabbed Flora's tail.

They were immediately transported to the living room of four Privet Drive. They looked around as Flora settled on Hermione's shoulder, and they saw that Petunia was in the

kitchen, apparently putting something away, frozen. Hermione took Ginny's hand and slowly approached Petunia until she activated, her back to Hermione and Ginny. "Mrs. Dursley?" said Hermione in a normal tone of voice.

Petunia shrieked and turned to face them, startled. "Who are you? What are you..." She trailed off as she apparently recognized them.

Partly to be polite, Hermione answered her question anyway. "I'm Hermione Granger, one of Harry's group. This is Ginny Weasley, she's his... the one he's going to marry. If he--"

"And you come barging into my home like this? You people don't know about knocking on doors?" Anger was taking the place of fright on Petunia's face.

"Yes, Mrs. Dursley, I was raised in a normal home, my parents are dentists. I thought you wouldn't want the neighbors seeing people dressed like us knocking at your door, and we didn't have time to change. We're in an urgent, desperate situation, and we need your help. Harry's been stung by something and is close to death. He will die unless he gets a blood transfusion, from as close a living relative as possible, and that's you."

Petunia looked bewildered, as though she hadn't understood what Hermione had said. "Stung? Doesn't he know enough to stay away from bees? And that's not deadly, anyway."

Trying very hard to be patient, Hermione replied, "It was a magical wasp, Mrs. Dursley, and they were after him. It's another attempt on his life by Voldemort."

"And he wants my help? After what he said in that article? He hates us so much, I'm surprised he wouldn't rather die than ask for my help."

"*He* might," said Ginny intensely. "*We're* the ones who are asking, partly because he can't, and partly because he's far more important to us than he is to himself. You know he didn't talk to that reporter, you know he didn't want the article written. Are you really going to let him die when you could prevent it because he said things to friends that upset you?"

"You try raising someone for fifteen years and then having them turn on you like that!" yelled Petunia.

"I'll never raise a child in a cupboard, I know that much!" responded Ginny at equal volume and greater intensity. "I'll never raise a child to make them feel like they're no good, to never be loved or cared for..." Feeling tears coming on, Ginny turned around and took deep breaths, obviously making a supreme effort to keep her emotions in check.

"Mrs. Dursley," said Hermione quietly, "we just don't have time to argue about that article, or Harry's childhood. You know how important he is to us, not to mention the entire wizarding community. But even if he wasn't, he's still a person. You may have the power to help save his life, and there's no risk to you whatsoever. The only reason not to do it would be that you're completely indifferent to whether he lives or dies."

"No, that's not right," said Ginny to Hermione. Still intense, she looked at Petunia. "Even if you're indifferent, you'd still do it, because he's a human being whose life is in danger. If you don't do it, it means that you'd prefer him dead than alive."

Petunia looked back at them angrily; what they were saying was apparently starting to sink in. "Is that what you think? Is that what he thinks, what he's told you?"

"He thinks you'd prefer never to see him again," said Hermione levelly. "I don't think he thinks that you'd prefer him dead. As for us, we don't think any particular thing. All I know is, you know it's urgent, you know his life is in danger, and you're still arguing with us. Most people would have said 'okay, let's go' by now. So, I don't know."

Petunia stared at Hermione. "It would never occur to you..." She stopped herself in mid-sentence, then said, "Never mind. You said I 'may' be able to save his life. Why 'may?'"

"It'll only work if you have the same blood type as he does," said Hermione. "What is your blood type, Mrs. Dursley?"

"You obviously assume that I don't know his blood type; it may surprise you to know that I took enough of an interest in his welfare to know that. We have the same type."

Hermione stared at Petunia, eyebrows raised slightly with an expression of 'well, then?' Petunia sighed. "How do we get there?"

Hermione produced from her robes a small box of tissues she had taken from St. Mungo's. "We'll take what's called a Portkey. Ginny, you take Flora. Mrs. Dursley, if you'll hold this box, we'll be there in an instant." Flora and Ginny disappeared as Petunia hesitated, then gingerly held the proffered box. "Portus," said Hermione, pointing her wand at the box.

A few seconds later, they were in the emergency care area of St. Mungo's. She had been careful to set up the Portkey destination far enough from Harry that he wouldn't be brought into time again. Petunia gasped at the change in scenery.

"Here she is," said Hermione to a Healer who she activated by walking near her, Ginny right behind, Flora re-settling on her shoulder.

The Healer walked over to Petunia, took her arm, and started to gently steer her away. "This way, ma'am," she said. With a suspicious look, Petunia allowed herself to be guided away.

Hermione followed them to make sure they stayed within the device's influence. The Healer asked Petunia to lie on a padded table, and she did, asking, "Why isn't anyone moving?" Hermione took a minute to explain it as they started taking Petunia's blood; Petunia just shook her head, as if thinking that she shouldn't be surprised by anything she was told by these people.

"Are you going to go to the Ministry, get the people to deal with the insects back at Hogwarts?" asked Ginny.

Somber, Hermione shook her head. "This thing might have only two minutes left on it, for all I know. Until Harry has to be activated to receive the blood, he's going to get whatever few minutes this has left. After that, I'll go do that."

Ginny walked to the other side of the table, the direction in which Petunia's head was turned. Trying to hold back emotion, she said, "Mrs. Dursley, this is how important Harry is, to all of us. The person she wants to marry, and two of her best friends, are back at Hogwarts in the same room with a few dozen of those wasps. If that device stops working, their lives are at serious risk. She could get them help, but she won't until everything's been done for Harry that can be."

"I'm sure he'll be pleased," said Petunia, a bit sullenly.

Ginny shook her head sadly. "You really don't know him, do you. He'll be really angry. If he were able, he'd be

demanding that she go help them, even though it increased the risk that he'd die. He faces danger every day, Mrs. Dursley, danger that something like this will happen, because he refuses to back down from Voldemort. He could keep his head down, and Voldemort would leave him alone. But he won't, because it's the right thing to do.

"And speaking of which," added Ginny, now on a roll and with a captive audience, "The things he said in that last article, about the childhood article... I'm sure you know he was speaking directly to you, and it wasn't to try to get on your good side. He has no hope that that'll ever happen. He can't let himself hope for it, because when he has--"

"I know," Petunia interrupted, expressionless. "Dudley told me he said that."

"Oh," said Ginny, obviously surprised, and obviously taking Petunia's failure to contradict the statement as an implicit acknowledgment of its truth. "Well, he just felt that the article made you and your husband look worse than you deserved to, so he said what he said. He just thought it was the right thing to do. If you think it was easy for him to do that, you're wrong. But he doesn't hate you. He just has... issues. I would think you could understand why." Ginny paused. "I wish you could know him like we do. I don't know if you ever can, because so much has happened. But I wish you could." She turned and walked to the foot of the bed, her head down.

Hermione approached Ginny from behind, and put a hand on her shoulder. "It'll be all right, Ginny. It'll work."

Ginny turned and hugged Hermione, clinging to her. "Sometimes I feel like I just can't deal with this. It's so stressful, I feel like I want to just walk out of that thing's

range and be frozen in time, and find out what happened when we know. And I feel bad for feeling that way, because he's the one it's happening to, not me."

Hermione patted her back reassuringly. "It's harder on us than him, because we worry about him more than he does. It's hardest on you, obviously. You shouldn't feel bad. Can you imagine how he'd be reacting if someone was trying to kill you once a month? He'd be beside himself, he'd go crazy. You do very well, considering what you have to deal with. You have nothing to feel bad about."

Ginny dissolved in tears, sobbing into Hermione's shoulder. Hermione just held her. As Ginny's tears were winding down, she said, "I just have this blind faith that he'll always live, because he always does. And probably because I'd go crazy if I let myself think anything different."

Nodding, Hermione took one hand away to find tissues in her robes while holding Ginny with the other. Producing a packet, she offered it to Ginny, who chuckled and took it. "I can always count on you for that." She looked at Hermione gratefully, and added, "And for lots of other stuff, including saving his life." Ginny withdrew from the hug to blow her nose.

With a small smile, Hermione replied, "Like Ron said in August, you spend enough time around Harry, you're bound to end up saving his life sooner or later." She shook her head. "What a thing to make jokes about. But at the same time, it's almost true. And who would know better than us."

The Healer, who had been pretending she hadn't been listening but obviously had, announced that she had all she needed. "I'm ready for you to start the clocks going again," she said to Hermione.

"Okay, now it's off to the Ministry," said Hermione. To Ginny, she added, "Just stay right here, you'll never know I was gone."

"I think this is the only time that's literally true," said Ginny. Hermione nodded, and an instant later, was standing a few feet to the left, releasing Flora's tail.

"The Ministry people are in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, and Ron, Pansy, and Neville are upset with me for not taking them here," reported Hermione. "They're safe, they're in the Great Hall."

"Thank goodness," said Ginny. "Now, one more thing to hope for, the biggest one."

The Healer moved a tray containing supplies to the edge of the field. "Any time," she said to Hermione. Nodding, Hermione moved the toggle of the device, and time started again.

* * * * *

In his hospital bed, Harry put down his wand. "Well, that was the first time I ever tried to view such a long memory, I'm surprised that it worked."

"It's all that practice we've been doing," said Hermione.

"I felt so bad for Ginny," he said sadly. "You're right, I would be going crazy if it was her that this was happening to."

"She'll be all right. But yes, obviously this is enormously difficult for her. Anyway, after what you saw, there was nothing else worth seeing especially. Fawkes came immediately after time started and dropped two tears on where the wasp stung you, and they gave you the blood

transfusion. We still didn't know anything for a half an hour. At one point McGonagall showed up, and I told her the story. She'll probably be back as soon as she knows you're up. Soon after that, they told us that you'd be okay, which they seemed pretty impressed by. Then McGonagall made Ginny and I go back to Hogwarts. I have a feeling she wanted to tell us to go back as soon as she got here, but knew we wouldn't until we found out about you."

"Why didn't you bring her with you?"

"I didn't want this to be any more conspicuous than it was. I'm sure McGonagall will let her see you soon. Also, I wanted you to see the memory of what happened, and I was the only one who could show you."

"When did you take Petunia back?"

"Soon after time started again. When we got back and I was about to leave, she talked to me for a minute. She asked me to tell you that she doesn't want you treating her any differently than you otherwise would because of what happened. She doesn't want there to be any feeling of obligation on your part. I told her I'd tell you."

"I wonder why she said that," mused Harry. "I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have said that to a 'normal' relative. I suppose it probably means that she still doesn't like me, and doesn't want me to think that her agreeing to do this meant that she did, so I wouldn't get a wrong impression. You did have to twist her arm pretty hard to get her to come. It's funny, part of me is surprised that it took her so long to agree, and part is surprised that she did it at all."

"I don't think it was a matter of me twisting her arm. I think it just took a certain... adjustment on her part to be willing to do anything in the magical world, even something this

important. She has this visceral negative feeling about it, and she just had to take a minute to accept the idea. It's a good thing time was stopped. I actually considered taking her by force if she wouldn't agree, but I realized that the people at St. Mungo's probably wouldn't have taken her blood if I brought her in unconscious, unless I lied and said she fainted or something."

"Not to mention, you'd have been up on serious charges of violence against a Muggle, probably got your wand broken," pointed out Harry.

"I think, considering the circumstances, I'd have been forgiven." She gave him a gently chiding look, then added, "But even if not, you know very well I'd have done it anyway, regardless of that, and my ethical reluctance."

"I know," he said. "And thank you. For that, and for everything."

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You're very welcome. I'm going to have to go in a minute, Flora's telling me that McGonagall is coming."

"Are you going to go now, before she gets here?"

Hermione shook her head. "You'd have to lie about my having been here, and she'd probably know anyway. Who knows, maybe she'll let me stay for a bit."

"I doubt it," said Harry. "It'll probably be security stuff. But I hope so."

The door to the private room opened, and McGonagall and Snape walked in. "Miss Granger," said McGonagall sternly, "I should advise you that while having a phoenix allows you to go anywhere you choose, there are rules to be considered."

"I'm sorry, Professor," said Hermione sincerely. "Harry woke up and wanted someone to visit. He didn't actually ask, but Fawkes knew, and he told Flora, who told me. So I came. I also wanted to show him what happened, which I just got finished doing."

"Very well, it is better that he knows. Normally, I would ask you to leave, but part of what we have to talk to Harry about involves you, so you may stay." Hermione got up from her chair; as she sat in it, McGonagall conjured two more, and Snape and Hermione took seats.

"I have just returned from a meeting with the Dark Lord," said Snape. "It will please you to know that he is most unhappy that this latest attempt has failed, and even more unhappy that you received crucial assistance from the device you took from him in June. He is very surprised that the headmistress never confiscated it."

"I just assumed that you figured we'd need it more than you would," said Harry.

McGonagall nodded. "It seemed a rather obvious conclusion."

"There are two significant unanswered questions about this operation," continued Snape. "One is the question of how the wasps were induced to seek out you in particular. Blood is required for that, and a larger amount than would have remained in the vial from two years ago. The other is the question of how the wasps were brought into Hogwarts. No doubt Miss Granger did not have time to discover every last detail about this particular variety of wasp, but the target must be within a certain range of the wasp; that range is thought to be roughly fifty meters. There is no spot within a hundred meters of the Defense Against the Dark Arts

classroom which is outside Hogwarts, so they had to have been released within the school."

"So the question is, who got them in, and how," filled in Harry. "I'm worried that the first thing people are going to do once they find out is assume it was Marcus."

"It is not impossible that it could have been him, but it would have been a difficult operation for an adult to carry off, never mind an eleven-year-old," said Snape. "The best reason not to suspect him is that if he had brought them with him at the beginning of the year, they would have had to be contained in some sort of magical apparatus, which would have failed to function when the magic was disrupted, resulting in the wasps' premature release. Since that did not happen, we may reasonably assume that Mr. Avery had nothing to do with it. There are other ways it could have been done, but all involve the use of artifacts, and therefore can barely be guessed at."

"Does that mean that we pretty much have to conclude that it was an artifact?" asked Harry.

Snape seemed to be trying to rein in impatience with Harry's unsophisticated outlook on such things. "No, Professor, it is simply the best guess at the moment. We can conclude nothing, for lack of evidence. Any further deductions would simply be conjecture."

"I understand," said Harry. "As far as the blood, the only thing I can think of is that he used his own, which has some of mine in it. Would that work?"

"I would not have thought so," replied Snape, "but I see no other way he could have procured your blood. The potion he used to return to physical form is ancient and extremely seldom used, so we can only guess about its effects on his

physicality. For all we know, his blood could be an exact match for yours."

"With any luck, we'll get a chance to find out someday," said Harry, his expression one of determination.

"I hope it will not solely be a matter of luck," replied Snape, though Harry could tell Snape understood his meaning. "To move on, there is another topic to discuss, which involves Miss Granger. The purpose of my meeting with the Dark Lord today was not solely for him to vent his displeasure. The combination of the failure of this recent effort and your development of the ability to incapacitate him has motivated him to take measures that I would have preferred he avoided."

Snape appeared to be about to continue, but Harry cut in. "He wants you to kill me."

Annoyed, Snape nodded. "Yes, though fortunately he still hopes that my viability can be salvaged, which gives me some leeway. He would ideally like me to find a way to dispose of you without being considered as a suspect, though he has also said that if I can find a way to do it that I am sure will not fail, and am able to escape, I have his permission to do so."

"Considering how badly he wants me dead, I'm surprised he doesn't just tell you to do it anyway, whether you get caught or not," commented Harry.

"The Dark Lord does not instruct Death Eaters to go on missions that are certain to result in death or capture," Snape explained. "Their loyalty to him is not based on ideology, or devotion to a cause. Rather, it is based on self-interest, the notion that they serve themselves by serving him; that is the basis on which he recruited them. He knows

he would quickly lose their loyalty by sending them on suicide missions."

I should have thought of that, thought Harry. "Is there a deadline?"

"Not exactly, except for the obvious one, the end of June. He would like it done sooner rather than later, of course, but since he hopes to maintain my viability as a future Hogwarts headmaster, he is giving me flexibility in developing the plans.

"Needless to say, we wish to encourage him to show restraint in his instructions to me. That is where you come in, Miss Granger."

Hermione's eyebrows rose high. "Me? What can I do about this?"

Giving Hermione an unusually serious look, McGonagall spoke. "The more likely it is that Professor Snape will become headmaster, the more restraint in this area Voldemort will show. We need, therefore, to give him more reason to think that what he wishes will happen.

"Since I just became headmistress this year, it is obviously not plausible that I would consider retirement. The only way that I might be removed from the picture is my sudden death, or a serious illness. He will be led to believe that the latter is the case."

"Will he believe it, if Professor Snape tells him you told him that?" asked Harry. "It would seem too convenient."

"Yes," agreed McGonagall, "which is why it will not be done that way. I will give the appearance of illness through my actions. I will cut back on my teaching schedule, and you,

Hermione, will fill in for me. You will teach all of my first and second year classes, as well as the seventh year class in which you are currently a student. I will say publicly that my reason is to devote more time to being headmistress, as well as give you teaching practice in view of your taking over full-time next year. Professor Snape will tell Voldemort that I am saying the same thing privately, but that he has noted a number of small clues which suggest what we wish him to believe. This will not seem suspicious, since fortunately it would be perfectly in character for me to tell no one if I did in fact develop such an illness. Obviously, we wish him to believe that the reason for my reducing my schedule is my illness."

"I understand," said Hermione, very serious. "Will this work with my schedule? I'd be willing to drop a class or two if I had to."

Despite the gravity of the situation, a small smile crossed McGonagall's face. "No doubt you are the only student for whom that would be a true concession. Fortunately, the possibility of this occurring was foreseen, and part of what made the schedule so difficult for Professor Snape to assemble. The Transfiguration classes for the first and second years were deliberately scheduled where there are gaps in your schedule. You could take over the sixth year classes without having to drop any of your own, and you could teach the fourth year classes if you dropped Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. Those steps will be kept in reserve for the time being, to provide the potential for the appearance of a progression of the illness, should it become desirable."

"When will I start teaching?" asked Hermione, clearly excited despite trying not to seem so.

With a hint of amusement in her eyes, McGonagall replied, "Monday, so I would suggest you spend part of your weekend refreshing your knowledge of first- and second-year Transfiguration."

"Oh, I will, Professor. Thank you."

Harry couldn't resist a smile. "You know what's best about this, Hermione... you'll be able to come into the staff room now."

"That will be nice," she agreed. "Professor, it's not important in view of all this, but I'm just wondering... I'll have to give up the position of Head Girl, won't I?"

"Yes, you will. You will have more than enough on your plate, and as was the case with Harry, it is not appropriate for one functioning as a teacher to hold the position. I will offer the position to Miss Parkinson.

"There is one thing I would like to impress on the both of you," continued McGonagall sternly. "No one outside this room is to know about this. Not Mr. Longbottom, not Miss Weasley, not the other staff members, no one. This must remain as closely held as possible. Do you understand?"

Harry and Hermione both gave their acknowledgment. "Good. Professor Snape and I will be going. Harry, after we leave, you may call Miss Weasley and have Fawkes bring her here, and the other three after you are finished visiting with her." Turning to Hermione, McGonagall added, "I will meet with you later this evening to discuss the details of this change, Professor Granger."

Hermione beamed with pleasure at being addressed that way for the first time. "Thank you, Professor." Flora took flight, and Hermione was gone.

Snape and McGonagall then left, and Harry decided to simply send Fawkes for Ginny rather than call her on his hand. He showed up about five seconds later, Ginny holding on. She let go of him, and quickly leaned over and gave Harry a long kiss. "Now, that felt very... healing," he said with a smile as she took his hand and sat down.

"How do you feel?"

He thought for a second. "Not that bad, given what happened. Kind of tired, which I guess is my body trying to fight off the poison. But I know I'll be all right."

"Thanks to Hermione," said Ginny. "She was great."

He nodded. "I never thought I'd have my life saved by research skill, but that's pretty much what happened. Snape and McGonagall were just in here, and Hermione showed me the memory of what happened; I was able to view it with Legilimens. I felt so bad for you, what you have to go through every time this happens..."

"I knew what I was signing up for, Harry," she said earnestly. "I know that doesn't make it any easier when it happens, but I knew. I'll deal with it. But I feel bad that I wasn't able to hold it together any better with your aunt. I could have messed everything up, you could have died..."

"Considering the situation, I think you did well," said Harry, squeezing her hand. "I mean, look at how she was being... I'm sure there was a lot more you wanted to say, but didn't."

"Oh, you have no idea," she said fervently. Then sighing, she added, "But it wouldn't do any good. At least she ended up doing it."

"I think maybe what you said helped," said Harry. "I mean, she hadn't done anything remotely nice to me in my whole life, except let me stay there. I have a feeling that what she did was like letting me stay there, something she couldn't quite live with herself if she didn't do. Anyway, I think what you said nudged her towards doing it."

"I hope so," said Ginny. "I wasn't exactly thinking really clearly. Hermione, again, was terrific. Knowing how emotional she can be, she was amazingly calm." With a wry smile, she added, "I guess she knew one of us had to stay calm, and that it wasn't going to be me."

"It could also be Flora's influence, at least partly," suggested Harry. "Phoenixes do have that effect. It'll be interesting over this year to see if we can see Hermione changing at all. Funny how you wouldn't have been able to tell with me, because Fawkes joined me when I was changing anyway. He obviously helped, it was just hard to see how much was him and how much was the energy of love."

They were silent for a minute, focusing on holding hands and looking into each other's eyes. Ginny said, "It's funny, just now, thinking about phoenixes made me think that I wished I could be connected to you like Fawkes is, that I could feel what you're feeling, feel your love for me. But I can see it in your eyes, and it's really almost the same thing."

He felt a surge of love as he spoke, and wondered if it was reflected equally strongly in his eyes. "I know what you mean. I love you so much, Ginny. I wish I had the words to say it properly, but I don't."

"It's all right," she assured him. "Like I said, it's in your eyes." They looked at each other in silence again for a few

minutes, then she ran a hand up his arm, smiling mischievously. "Oh, what I could do to you now, now that you're too weak to resist."

He chuckled. "I don't recall that I normally do any resisting."

"I mean in semi-public places, which is what this is. If I did what I'd like to do, you'd be trying to stop me, but you wouldn't be able to."

"If you did what I assume you'd like to do, not only would they throw you out, but it would be in the Prophet tomorrow," countered Harry.

"It might be worth it. I wouldn't mind having that device right now, that would help. Thanks goodness it worked for as long as it did."

"Voldemort did say two hours, and he was probably right, but I can see why Hermione didn't want to take any chances. He was so smug back in June, he didn't care about telling us something useful like that because he thought she and I would never live to take advantage of it. I have a feeling that if he had me in his power again, he'd just kill me, and resist the temptation to find out what I know."

"I don't think he's ever going to get you in his power again," said Ginny confidently. "He's not going to be able to get your wand away, and you can do the Imperius Charm. The next time you face him, he'll be the one who has to worry, not you."

Harry didn't quite feel that confident, but he could see why she said it. "I hope you're right. I guess we'll find out at some point, probably late June."

"Why then?" she asked.

"Don't know, that's just when these things always seem to happen. The first three times I saw him—in person, that is, not in dreams—were all at the end of June in the last three years."

She shrugged. "It's just coincidence."

"Maybe. Anyway, how have things been at Hogwarts since this happened? And how long has it been?"

"Four hours, I think they thought you'd be out for longer than that. I assume the others told you that the Ministry people rounded up the rest of the wasps, at least they're pretty sure they did. It turns out that the rest of the school was in danger; if their main target is out of range, they go for whoever's nearest. Apparently they were bred for assassination, which makes sense. So, people were pretty nervous, and talking about it a lot. Obviously, people were really relieved to hear that you made it, which I know since I was the one to tell most people. I wouldn't leave the hospital until I knew you were going to be all right." She chuckled at the memory she was about to relate. "McGonagall suggested I go back to the school before then, which of course I wouldn't. I think she made it a suggestion instead of an order because she figured I'd refuse the order, and didn't want to have to punish me for it, or have me defy her and not be punished."

"I don't see why she'd even suggest it," said Harry. "She must have had some idea of how you felt. I know that logically it doesn't matter whether you waited here or at Hogwarts, but it's the idea."

"Sometimes I think that she still doesn't really accept the idea that I'm your wife, or partner, or whatever you want to call it, because I'm not seventeen yet. At least now I'm

sixteen, which is probably close enough to make it seem different to a lot of people."

"I'm sorry this had to happen on your birthday," he said.

"I have a feeling Voldemort didn't know. I doubt he celebrates birthdays. Anyway, having you be all right after that happened is a pretty good gift."

"I'm glad," he said, as he reached into his robes and pulled out a small, felt-covered box. "But I hope you'll like this one too." He handed it to her.

She looked pleased but slightly puzzled, so Harry assumed that a small, felt-covered box didn't signify in the wizarding world what it did in the Muggle world. She opened it and gasped; it was a silver ring with a small diamond. "Oh, Harry, it's beautiful..."

Smiling at her reaction, he said, "I'm glad you like it. I kind of wanted to get you one of the ones with bigger diamonds, but they seemed kind of... too much, like something you'd feel strange about wearing every day. I don't know much about rings."

She put it on her finger, and to Harry's further pleasure, it fit perfectly. "It's wonderful," she assured him as she stood to lean over and kiss him again. "Thank you, thank you so much. I love you."

"I love you too," he said. "Do they have engagement rings in the wizarding world?"

"Yes, they do. Not everything is different, I guess."

"Well," he said, "maybe now McGonagall will accept the idea that it's like we're married, now that you have a ring and

everything."

She smiled and touched his face. "I'm sure she'll be really impressed. Okay, no, she won't. But I am, and that's the important thing." She looked at the ring again, then leaned over and kissed him again. "Do you want to have Fawkes bring the others?"

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Her smile grew even wider. "Well, I have to show this to someone."

* * * * *

He returned to Hogwarts the next day, though the St. Mungo's Healers strongly recommended that he do nothing strenuous for the next few days. As he entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, having returned from his quarters after lunch, he reflected that he would have to ignore the recommendation at least once.

The desks were away from the center of the room, but the other five were all standing. "Harry, good," said Hermione as he walked in. "You have to do the carpet. I tried one, but it wasn't very good. I still have to work on it a bit." Harry waved his wand, and a thick, red carpet was suddenly on the floor. "Thanks," said Hermione as they all sat on it.

"You should do one for the common room," suggested Ron, half-seriously. "A big, red carpet with the Gryffindor crest on it."

Harry shook his head. "I think that would take some artistic ability, which I don't have. I think a carpet like this is about the best I can do."

"Okay, now I get to do my new spell," said Hermione, seeming slightly excited.

"She called it a 'do-not-disturb' sign," added Pansy, amused at Hermione's attitude. "She said you'd understand the reference."

Harry explained it to the others, then asked Hermione, "So, what kind of spell is it exactly? Does it tell people not to come in here?"

"No, it's better than that," she said enthusiastically. "It gives anybody passing by the impression that the room is empty; it's like a smaller version of the spell that hides Hogwarts from Muggles. If someone tries to walk in, they'll see what's going on, but this'll discourage people from seeing that we're in here and coming in to chat, or to ask a question. Not that that would be such a terrible thing, since we'll just be talking and doing homework, but I'd rather that people didn't notice."

"It's a good idea," agreed Pansy. "And I appreciate that you do this with me in mind, since the rest of you could just stay in the Gryffindor common room."

"It's no problem, obviously," Ginny assured her. "We want to. So, Hermione, we won't notice anything from this?"

"No, it'll look the same to us. The door will be closed, and we'll see it as closed, but anyone passing by will see it as open, since the classroom doors are always supposed to be open if there's no class going on." She raised her wand and pointed it at the door, which closed. "Okay, it's done. Just so you know, I did tell McGonagall I was going to do this, I didn't think it was right for her not to know. Of course, if she sent for one of us with the cat, the spell wouldn't fool the cat anyway." She opened her bag and started pulling out books,

finally placing ten on the carpet next to her, in two stacks of five.

Ron raised his eyebrows a little, but said nothing. Noticing, Hermione asked, "What, no jokes?"

"It's kind of like Harry with the first years a few weeks ago," explained Ron. "The joke is already there, no point in saying anything."

Hermione rolled her eyes fleetingly. "Obviously I'm not going to read all these, they're just for reference. But I'm going to be teaching. I need to be able to look things up."

"Yes, I remember all the times we saw Harry carrying ten books around, when he was going to be a teacher," responded Ron with amusement.

"Transfiguration is different from Defense Against the Dark Arts," she protested.

"No, I think you're just different from Harry," retorted Ron. "Or are you going to tell us that you wouldn't have cracked ten books if you were going to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

"You can think what you want," she said defensively, in what Harry assumed was an implicit concession that he was right.

Ron turned his attention to Harry. "So, how are you feeling today?"

Harry shrugged. "A night of sleep really helped, but still a bit off, nothing I can really put into words. Not bad, though, considering I was a minute away from death less than twenty-four hours ago."

"Well, anything's going to look pretty good, compared to that," said Neville.

"That's true," conceded Harry.

"I wondered, Harry," asked Neville, "how do you feel about your aunt right now?"

Harry sighed. "That's a tough question. On the one hand, what she did saved my life. On the other hand, any reasonably moral person would have done the same thing, and with far less hesitation. So, I'm not sure."

"I kind of hate to say this, but you may not be giving her enough credit," said Hermione. "I know she's really far from Molly on the being nice scale, but for her, the magical world is a scary place. Awful things happen there, she can even read about them in the papers Molly sends her. Suddenly two people appear in her living room, in a way that Muggles would consider like breaking in, and tell her she has to go to somewhere and give blood, right away. I think some people would hesitate."

"I think you're being a little too understanding about it," said Ron. "She mentioned that article, which she knew by then he had nothing to do with. It was as if that was a reason not to do anything."

"I have a feeling that after she found out that Harry had nothing to do with it," said Hermione, "she shifted her focus from the article in general to the specific things that Harry said, and didn't deny having said. Of course, he didn't say anything that she didn't deserve, but this is looking at it from her viewpoint. If she denies to herself that she was that bad to Harry, then she could feel pretty put upon that he said those things. It shouldn't affect her willingness to save his life, of course, and I definitely wouldn't defend what she

did. I'm just saying there may be reasons that she didn't do it immediately other than that she's a horrible person."

"You mean, 'in addition to,'" countered Ron. "Come on, Hermione, she *is* a... okay, maybe not 'horrible,' let's keep that in reserve for Death Eaters, but she and her husband are just bad people, that's all there is to it. You may want to think the best of people, and that's nice, but they were just awful to Harry when he hadn't done anything to deserve it. I don't think anybody could look at what she did and say she's not a bad person."

"So, you don't think it's worth it to try to look at it from her point of view?" pressed Hermione.

"Not if her point of view is a total delusion, no," shot back Ron. "If she's focusing on the quotes, she knows they're true, and she should be apologizing to Harry for what they did to him. I'm not interested in her point of view any more than I'm interested in Voldemort's point of view."

Hermione sighed in frustration. "Why do you have to be like this, Ron, so... hard and unforgiving?"

Pansy gave Hermione a serious look. "I guess we're well matched, then, because I agree with him. She doesn't deserve any kind of consideration at all, as far as I'm concerned."

Hermione turned to Pansy, still frustrated. "People can change, Pansy. You—" Hermione abruptly stopped speaking, suddenly looking uncomfortable.

An unreadable look came to Pansy's face as she stared at Hermione. "'I should know that better than anyone' is what you were going to say."

"I'm sorry, Pansy, I—"

"No, you're right, I do. Look... first of all, Hermione, don't feel bad. I'm not angry with you, you shouldn't have to walk on eggshells around me about this for the rest of your life. It would only really bother me if you were trying to be nasty, and I know you're not. And it's a good point.

"But Ron is right, she is a bad person. Now, you might say, 'yes, Pansy, but someone could have said the same thing about you.' Yes, they could. And you know what? They'd be right! I *was* a bad person! I should know *that* better than anyone, and I do." Pansy's voice was only slightly raised, her tone emphatic, her emotion obvious. "I didn't know it at the time, of course. I had my own 'point of view,' my ways of justifying it to myself, like I'm sure Harry's aunt does. She had her perfect, tidy, little life messed up by finding Harry on her doorstep, and she took it out on him. And I think that same part of her—I think we could call it 'being a bad person'—was what caused her to hesitate and complain when Harry's life could have been slipping away as she did, for all she knew."

She paused, and thought for a few seconds as the others waited in silence. "I've had a chance to think about this a lot, over the past year. I don't think anybody decides to be a bad person, like you wake up and say to yourself, 'I think I'll be bad today.' I think it happens in little bits, little choices you make every day. You do what makes you feel good, or less bad, and manage not to think about who you're hurting, or think they somehow deserve it. You do what's easy instead of what's right, like Professor Dumbledore said when Voldemort came back. In my case, I just wanted to feel good about myself and discovered I could do it by making other people feel bad, though I didn't even really think about what I was doing. With her, some part of her had to know that it

was wrong to vent her frustrations on an innocent child, but she did it anyway.

"Yes, people can change. I did, and she could. But you have to decide to do it, to realize that what you were doing was wrong. If she did, I'm sure Harry would be... well, he'd do his best to forgive her, though it wouldn't be easy. He forgave me easily, but I hadn't hurt him nearly as badly as she had. Anyway, she hasn't done that yet, taken a painful look in the mirror, like I did. Maybe I'm unforgiving because I suffered a lot to get to where I am. But until she shows any interest in recognizing what she did, I don't think she deserves to have anyone go out of their way to understand her 'point of view.'"

There was another silence. Harry looked at Pansy and saw determination; he understood it hadn't been easy for her to say what she said, and he was sure that talking about her past would never be easy for her. Hermione looked abashed, but not convinced. "Pansy," she said softly, "I couldn't argue with you. And I wasn't trying to excuse what she did, either yesterday or when Harry was a child. Just explain it."

Pansy's tone was still hard, but managed to get across that she wasn't upset at Hermione. "I think Ron explained it pretty well when he said she was a bad person. She's a bad person who doesn't want to see herself as a bad person, and she gave the blood because she couldn't find a good enough reason to avoid doing it. I don't want Harry thinking that what she did means anything other than that. There's simply no reason to think it does."

Hermione looked at Pansy, as if trying to understand her more clearly. "Do you think I'm trying to pick up where Molly left off? Trying to reconcile him and his aunt?"

"No, Hermione, I don't. I know you're just trying to think of people in the best possible way. But Harry's going to get hurt if he starts thinking like that and it turns out his aunt's attitude hasn't changed."

"Don't worry, that's not going to happen," said Harry, speaking for the first time in several minutes as his situation was being discussed. "I'll write a letter, be polite, express gratitude. But I won't say anything that's not true, and I won't have any expectations of any kind of response. Like I said to Ginny and Dudley that day, that's too well ingrained in me to forget."

"I was actually pretty surprised that Dudley told her that," said Ginny. "I wouldn't have thought that would come up in a conversation between them. When she said that at St. Mungo's, I could tell that she knew it was true, she wasn't denying it. Anyway, Harry, that sounds like a good thing to do."

"Yes, it does," agreed Hermione. "Harry, I want you to know that I wasn't trying to do what Molly did."

"It's all right, I know. Well, Neville, I guess the answer to your question is that I don't feel a lot different about her. For that to happen, she'd have to do something she didn't feel utterly compelled to do."

"Wow, did I start this? Sorry about that," said Neville innocently, as the others chuckled. "I'd forgotten."

"It's an interesting question to think about, though," commented Ginny. "It's like, if we think about evil, we think about Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Harry's aunt isn't what we'd call evil, but... there's different degrees, I suppose."

"The interesting thing is," said Pansy, "I'm sure she wants to think of herself as good. That was what you and Hermione were speaking to when you were talking to her. If she didn't care whether she saw herself that way, you probably couldn't have convinced her."

"Thank goodness for that, then," said Ron. "But is there anybody, really-okay, besides Death Eaters-who doesn't think of himself as good, or at least, wanting to be?"

"Probably, people who life's beaten up a bit," suggested Harry. "I remember Albus suggesting that Tom Riddle's childhood probably had a lot to do with what happened to him. But even from my own experience, there have been plenty of times I felt really put upon, and at those times I'm not sure I cared about whether I was 'good,' whether I was doing the right thing. Not only the time when Sirius died, but other times too. At that moment, you just feel like you don't care, like whatever you do is okay because you're so angry, or in pain. If somebody's life was really awful, I could imagine them developing that kind of attitude."

"When you say that," said Neville, with a sad expression, "the first thing I think of is Blaise. I mean, I don't know what his home life is like, but until last year, his school life had to have been horrible. You always looked forward to coming to Hogwarts, but I bet he dreaded it. I wonder what his attitude is like now, but he's so shy, it's hard to know."

"Oh, that reminds me, I was going to tell you," said Harry. "I ran into him on the way here. He was kind of nervous, as usual, and said he wanted to talk to me in private. I figured it was about how the class was going. We went to the nearest classroom, and then it took him a minute to tell me what he wanted, because he got even more nervous. I soon

found out why; it turned out he was taking me up on my offer from class, and wanted a hug."

All five gaped at him. "You must be kidding," said Ron.

Harry shook his head. "Nope. He could barely get the words out, but that was what he wanted to ask."

"Oh, that's so sweet," said a smiling Hermione. "How did he react when you hugged him?"

"It was almost like he'd never been hugged before," said Harry, "or that he was really nervous, but he didn't hold on very tight. I had to tell him he should hold on harder, and then he did. I hugged him for longer than I normally would, because he didn't seem to have the hang of it. When I let him go, it was almost like he was surprised, like he thought it was supposed to go on longer or something. I asked him if he'd like to try it again, but he got kind of embarrassed and shook his head. I just said, 'Okay, then, if you change your mind, let me know, see you later,' and left. He seemed uncomfortable, and I didn't know what I should say. I guess it's usually awkward talking to him, because he doesn't know how to really relate to people. But I was glad he asked, it just seems like a good sign."

"A very surprising one," added Neville. "I would never have thought he'd do that. I mean, I've been helping him twice a week for three weeks, and he hasn't quite managed to be comfortable talking to me. This had to be a big deal for him."

"I hope it helps him come out of his shell a bit," said Harry. "Anyway, it wasn't only him. I got two other hugs this morning before lunch, from Lavender and Susan. Susan was pretty funny, she said, 'I figured if Justin can hug you, then it's all right if I do.' I think with them, it was that they were

happy that I survived yesterday, and just picked that way to show it because of what I said in class."

Ginny smiled. "Soon half the school will be running around hugging each other, and McGonagall won't know what to do."

"Well, I only plan on saying this to the sixth and seventh years. I'm not sure I want first and second years feeling like they should hug each other; I mean, it's awkward enough for the seventh years."

"Somehow, I have a feeling that word will filter down," said Ginny, with a tone that teased Harry for not having thought of it.

"The Slytherin seconds will do it for sure, you know how they are about anything you say," said Pansy. "Actually, it may really help them. That young, they won't be so comfortable hugging each other, but they'll do it. Doing something that makes them overcome embarrassment could be helpful."

"That is kind of the idea, at least partly," agreed Harry, "but I don't want to push too hard. This could be kind of a sensitive issue. What if someone asks someone else for a hug, but they say no? Feelings could get hurt, so I want to be careful."

"Of course, that's true, but—"

Pansy was interrupted by a knock at the door; the six looked at each other in surprise. "I thought you said the door appeared open to anyone outside," whispered Ron.

"It does," answered Hermione. "Whoever knocked knows we're in here, and about the spell. It has to be McGonagall."

I'll open the door and withdraw the spell." The door opened, and to Harry's great surprise, in walked Rudolphus Bright.

Harry leaped to his feet, the others not far behind. Smiling, Bright surveyed the room. "Very nice, it's like a private little study area."

"Minister," said Harry as he shook Bright's outstretched hand. "Let me introduce you to the others—"

"Hardly necessary," said Bright as he offered Ron his hand, then the others, in turn. "Ron... Neville... Pansy... Ginny, I'm sorry you didn't have a very nice birthday yesterday... and Hermione, congratulations on becoming a teacher. It's a pleasure to meet you all. 'I've heard a lot about you' is one of those things you just normally say, but in this case, it's quite true. All one needs to do is read the Prophet."

He turned to face Harry. "Harry, apart from expressing relief that you recovered from what happened yesterday, there are a few things I came to discuss with you. I was thinking we could go into your office, but if you'd just prefer to discuss it here, with the others, that's fine too. I know that what concerns you concerns them too. Whatever you'd like."

Harry wondered whether Bright had a preference, and why he suggested staying in the classroom at all; perhaps he would ask something that Harry wouldn't want to do but his friends would want? He knew his friends probably wouldn't be offended if he wanted to have the meeting privately, but he decided that having them there would save him the time of telling them about it later. "Here is good," he said. "Should I conjure some chairs, or..."

Bright shook his head as he bent over and sat on the carpet. "I spend most days in meetings in straight-backed chairs, so sitting on the floor is a nice change of pace."

Harry sat opposite Bright, and his friends sat nearby, facing them. "Hermione, could you..." asked Bright. Nodding, she pointed her wand at the door and resumed the spell which gave the impression of an empty room.

"You know, Minister," started Harry, who interrupted himself when Bright glanced at him with an unspoken correction. "Rudolphus," he continued, "you really don't have to come out here every time you want to talk to me. You know I can be at the Ministry in a few seconds, with a lot less trouble than it takes you to come here."

Bright nodded. "I know. Did Dentus explain why I came to see you last time?"

"Yes, he said it was a show of respect. I appreciate it, but you're vulnerable from the Owl Office to the Hogsmeade gate." With a small smile, he added, "We could just agree that I understand that you respect me, and meet at the Ministry anyway."

"I suppose we could," agreed Bright, seemingly amused at Harry's practical outlook. "I'll think about it in the future. But it's really not that dangerous. I have two Aurors with me, and I don't tell anyone my plans in advance, even the Aurors. It's always nice to see Hogwarts again, but probably my reason for coming will be plain soon."

"First of all, Harry, I wanted to talk to you about what you and Hermione did at the end of June. I was just briefed earlier this week on those events, and I was shown the memory that Kingsley had of seeing it. Before I go on, I have to say that even though I'm well aware of all you've done, I was still amazed that you could stay that focused, both of you. It was extremely impressive."

"We wouldn't have gotten out of there without Albus, though," Harry pointed out.

"That was the most amazing thing," said Bright. "I wasn't sure whether to believe Kingsley when he told me; he said he could barely believe it himself. And he's done it a few times since then?"

"The most recent one was the night the magic went out, when Voldemort attacked the Aurors. But fortunately, I can do that now, so I hope he won't have to."

"The reason I brought it up is that I wanted to discuss what you, the two of you," said Bright, glancing at Hermione, "accomplished in terms of detecting his whereabouts. As you know, for him to be able to be detected, relays have to be set up in such a way that no point can be farther than two miles from a relay. For Britain to be totally covered, several hundred relays will have to be manufactured and set up. Unfortunately, while they're not terribly expensive to make, they aren't cheap either. I mention this because just a few days ago I approved funding for their manufacture, and it should be starting any time."

Harry frowned. "Why did it take so long? I would have thought they'd have been doing it already. It's been almost three months."

Bright nodded sympathetically. "Unfortunately, there are sometimes practical obstacles to doing what needs to be done. The precise knowledge of what happened at the Veil of Mystery was very closely held. Kingsley decided not to tell Fudge, limiting him to information barely exceeding what was made public. One effect this had was to delay the production of the relays. Kingsley tried to get it funded in

back-channel ways, which wouldn't come to the Minister's attention, but with limited success."

"Why didn't he tell Fudge?" asked Harry.

Hermione spoke up. "He must have decided that Fudge couldn't be trusted with anything so confidential. I didn't know Fudge at all, so I don't know whether he could keep a secret, but Kingsley must have thought he couldn't. Also, telling him would mean telling him the whole story, including what Albus did, and I don't think Fudge would have believed it."

Bright nodded at Hermione, impressed. "Exactly right. You have to keep in mind, Harry, that Fudge felt very threatened by Dumbledore, which is ironic, since Dumbledore was the least threatening person you could imagine. But Dumbledore passed on the Minister's job, as you know, and Fudge probably always wondered if Dumbledore would decide he made a mistake, and try to take it after all. It's kind of like if you married a woman who was turned down by another man before ending up with you; you'd always wonder if she'd go to him if he decided he wanted her. Since Fudge wanted the job so much, he couldn't understand why Dumbledore didn't.

"Getting back to the point, even if he had been shown the memory, Fudge probably wouldn't have believed that Dumbledore caused Voldemort's collapse, since there was no hard evidence to support it. Also, you might not have known this, but it was understood in the Ministry that Fudge talked about things to his friends a little too much, and with Voldemort back, one can never know who could be subverted, or have their memories raided. Kingsley decided it was better to go slow than to take that kind of risk."

"But he told you," said Harry.

"Fortunately, he decided I could be trusted." With a wry smile, he added, "It seems I have a reputation for discretion. Also, I had no issues with Dumbledore. Needless to say, I'm completely on board with this, and I pushed through the funding earlier this week. No one is going to know the purpose except a few Aurors and the people manufacturing the relays, and even they won't know what it's for.

"Even doing that much, however, has attracted attention. Two days ago, I received an owl marked 'Minister's Eyes Only,' with the correct code for such correspondence. Obviously, most owls I get are screened by my staff, and not only because I don't have time to read them all. A very few people know the code that will ensure that a letter will be opened by me. This particular owl, however, was clearly sent by a Death Eater. It said that if I continued what I had done that week, I would end up like Fudge." Harry exchanged startled glances with his friends, which Bright noted. "Yes, my reaction was a lot like that, only more so. And then less than a minute later, the owl that brought it fell over, dead. A nice touch, that," he added sarcastically.

"Did the letter mention the relays specifically, or just the idea that you were doing something that opposed them?" asked Harry.

"The latter. So, whoever they got the information from knows that the money was disbursed to do something to fight Voldemort, just not what exactly. It's pretty hard to keep a secret these days at the Ministry, since the only way to make sure that Voldemort or Death Eaters who can do Legilimency don't get to people is to have them never be alone. And even that wouldn't be foolproof."

"Certainly Voldemort could take care of two or three people at once," agreed Harry. "I assume the Aurors agree that this is genuine, and that your life is in danger?"

Bright smiled grimly. "The Aurors made it clear from the day I took this office that my life was in great danger, not that I needed to be told. But I take your meaning, and yes, they agree that this specific threat is genuine. And for high-security situations like this, when I say 'they,' I'm generally referring to just Kingsley and Dawlish; it's not as though every Auror knows this kind of thing.

"So, that brings me to why I'm here. Security for the Minister was tightened after Fudge was killed, and even more so a few days ago. Except for unusual situations such as this, I am only ever in two places: my home, and my suite of offices at the Ministry. No casual walks around Diagon Alley chatting with the public, much as I enjoy that kind of thing. The Aurors are pretty sure that what happened to Fudge won't happen to me, at least not quite the same way; anyone who gets into my presence is magically checked to make sure they are who they appear to be. They also told me that Fudge didn't take his security seriously enough, and wasn't careful about who he allowed to get near him. So, I'm sort of living in a cocoon. I'm safe, but Kingsley and Dawlish concede that if Voldemort were to attack personally, with the help of Death Eaters, he could succeed. There's not much they can do about him, unless they outnumber him ten to one."

Harry now felt he understood why Bright had come to see him, but he wanted to wait for Bright to say the words. As if having read Harry's mind, Bright continued, "You've probably worked out by now what I'm here to ask. I'm very reluctant to do it-and please feel free to check me-partly because I have so much respect for what you've done, and

partly because I know you turned down Fudge. Of course, I'm not asking for the same thing he did. I don't want you standing around me all the time, even if you could do it, which you can't. What I would ask is that there be a way I could signal you, say, by touching a ring, very simple. I would do it only if I were under attack. There would be two signals: one for my office, one for my home. You would simply Apparate to my office or my home."

Harry nodded his understanding. "Do both places allow for Apparation?"

"My office doesn't, and they're putting a plot around my home now. The one around the office is similar to the Hogwarts one, so you'd be able to defeat it, but Voldemort probably wouldn't. They think Voldemort might be able to defeat the one around my home. They could have you do it, but then the problem would be that you couldn't Apparate in either." Bright was silent, waiting for either an answer or more questions.

Harry thought for a few seconds, and found that his mind was largely made up. He turned to face his friends. He thought about asking Bright to leave the room while they discussed it, but decided to let him stay. "I'm inclined to do it, but I want to know what you think."

"I don't like it," said Ginny, "but I admit my reasons have more to do with you being my partner than anything else. I just don't want you in any avoidable danger. You get enough as it is."

"It is different from what Fudge wanted," said Hermione, "it's still the same basic problem. You're..." She turned to Bright, solemn. "I'm sorry to be so blunt, Minister, but you're not as important as Harry."

Equally solemn, he nodded. "I know. I know about the prophecy, though even if I didn't, it would still be very clear. But I'm not simply asking out of fear for my life, though I admit I do feel that. There are other considerations as well."

Neville spoke. "It shouldn't be done by Harry, he's too valuable. It should be one of us."

"You couldn't Apparate in," pointed out Harry.

"We could take Fawkes or Flora."

"You couldn't deal with Voldemort if it was him. I assume that's why you asked me, and not them," he added to Bright, who nodded.

"Albus could take care of him," countered Neville.

"No, we can't plan for that," insisted Harry. "He's there to do that for emergencies and for when there's a real chance to catch Voldemort, not as a resource that we can plan to use. You know what it's like for him. I know what it was like when Voldemort possessed me, it was horrible, and I think it's worse for him. We simply can't make plans on the assumption that he'll do it."

"You could ask him," suggested Ginny.

"No, I won't ask him that," said Harry emphatically. "That's out of the question."

"But the whole point of this is to keep you safe!"

"No, the point is to defeat Voldemort. I understand that keeping me safe is a part of that, but we have to do what we would do if he wasn't around. Remember, he said in July that

he couldn't do more than what he planned to do when he went through the Veil."

"Why can't he, anyway?" asked Ron, curious.

"Because they're not supposed to interfere in physical matters from there. Not that they're not allowed to, he said, just that they don't. It's not like a rule, but it's a guideline he intends to follow. He'll do exactly what he planned when he was alive, and no more than that, you know how he always was about principle. Once he starts doing that, he says, it starts interfering with how we're supposed to live our lives. It's kind of complicated. I pretty much understood it when he told me--this was when I asked him to tell me who killed Skeeter, and he wouldn't--but it's hard for me to explain any more than that. But I know what he'd say."

Harry had glanced at Bright a few times during the conversation, and noticed a slowly deepening look of shock on Bright's face. At first he didn't understand the reason, but suddenly he did. "I'm guessing that when the Aurors told you about this, they didn't mention that I'm in communication with Albus."

Bright's mouth hung open slightly. "Yes, that would be a good guess," he said with understatement. "How in the world..."

Harry smiled in sympathy. "The same way he does the rest of what he does. In other words, we don't know. But it was part of what he planned before he left. It's part of why he taught me Legilimency; he said it helped make a connection to my mind. We talk when I'm asleep."

"Amazing... just amazing, just as much as what he does to Voldemort," said an obviously astonished Bright.

"Yes, it is," agreed Harry, who then turned back to his friends. "Anyway, if anyone does it, it has to be me. I'm the only one who can."

"Well," said Neville reluctantly, "it should be done, much as I hate to say it now. Especially after what happened to Fudge. I mean, you're right, Hermione, about Harry being too important to risk. But the problem is, they've already killed Fudge. What if they kill him?" he asked, gesturing to Bright. "Someone else takes the job, and they kill him too? It could get to a point where nobody would take the job, or whoever did would be too petrified to do anything to fight Voldemort, and I'm sure that's part of what Voldemort has in mind. We tease Harry about being made Minister of Magic someday, but it could come to that now, just because he'd be the only one who could survive the job. Not to mention that the Minister being killed would be bad for the community's morale. One Minister of Magic being killed, well, they got lucky. But two, it seems like we can't protect people, and if the Minister isn't safe, who is? It would make everyone feel like they're not safe."

Unhappy, Hermione nodded. "Yes, I see your point. I assume that's part of the reason you came to ask this," she said to Bright.

"Yes, and thank you, Neville, for making the point so I didn't have to. It is true, but I don't want to have to make that argument, since I have an ulterior motive... that is, wanting to stay alive," said Bright with a self-deprecating air.

"I don't think anyone would blame you for that," said Hermione quietly.

"No, I suppose not," agreed Bright, "but I did choose to pursue this job, I knew the risks. I knew Fudge had asked

something like this of you, and I planned not to. It just seems... different, in the face of a specific threat, one made in retaliation for my doing what I should be doing."

"To tell you the truth," said Harry, both to Bright and the others, "I hadn't thought of what Neville said, though I think he's right. I was looking at it in another way." A determined expression came to his face. "I feel like it could be an opportunity."

"Kingsley brought up this point; I was wondering if you would. I see you have quite a competitive spirit." To the others, Bright said, "Harry is thinking of me as bait. If Voldemort attacks, Harry's hoping not just to save me, but to have a chance at catching Voldemort."

"But he can always just disappear, with that device he has," pointed out Ron.

"Then before I do my thing on him, I'll try to find a way to get the device off. If I can do that, then knock him out, we've got him. I just need to figure out where he keeps it. Hermione, maybe you can research magical ways to get things off of people."

"We do have people at the Ministry who can do that kind of research," Bright pointed out. "Not that you wouldn't be equally good," he added to Hermione.

"Yes, but I don't want him to know I'm thinking about doing that, and you know that security's a problem. Maybe Professor McGonagall would research it too if I asked her."

"Harry," asked Pansy with obvious concern, "are you sure you want to go looking for a confrontation with him?"

"Yes, I am," he said fervently, more strongly than he meant to. "I'm sick of this, Pansy. Sick of waiting for the next attempt, wondering if it's going to get one of you instead of me. Sick of how it affects Ginny, and the rest of you. And just... angry in general, because people keep dying while he's out there. I'm waiting for the day that Kingsley calls me and says, we've got the relays in place, we know where he is. Then I'll say, let's go get him. I'm sick of fighting a defensive fight, I want to go on the offensive." He paused as the others looked at him with varying degrees of surprise. With a sheepish expression, he added, "Sorry, Pansy, I didn't mean to be saying that to you especially. I guess I just needed to get it off my chest."

"That's okay, I understand," she said "I can see how you'd feel that way."

He nodded his thanks, then turned to Bright. "I want you to know, Rudolphus, that I'm not saying that we should deliberately risk your safety so I can have a chance at Voldemort. It's just that--"

Bright waved him off. "I know, Harry. If he's going to be there anyway, you'd rather face him than not face him. I was using the word 'bait' loosely, I know that isn't really how you think of it.

"I guess you'll be working out the details of how it'll work with Kingsley. You'll need a tour of my office and my home, of course; whenever you two decide is convenient is fine."

"Just so you know, Minister," said Neville, "that wherever he goes, the rest of us will be within seconds, on the next available phoenix."

With a momentary grin at Neville's phrasing, Bright nodded. "I know. Your job is keeping him alive, and judging from

yesterday, you do it very well. I don't want anything happening to him, either." Bright stood, and Harry and the others did as well. "Well, Harry, I'm not sure what I can say except 'thank you.' The politician in me wants to offer you something in return, but I know that isn't the way you work."

With a small smile, Harry responded, "Maybe you can do the right thing for me sometime."

Bright laughed. "I hope so. It was good to meet all of you. Thanks again." He turned, walked to the door, and left.

The six sat back down. "I hope nobody held anything back because he was there," said Harry. "I just felt like if we were going to say no to him, we should do it to his face, because unlike Fudge, he asked to my face."

Ron shook his head. "No, I wasn't bothered. I wasn't thrilled with it, obviously, and I felt a lot like Ginny and Hermione did. But I could see Neville's point, too. I also felt like, and I didn't want to say this in front of him, but it was like, we finally seem to have a decent Minister of Magic, let's see if we can keep him alive."

"Yes, I was impressed, too," agreed Hermione. "I read about him a fair bit in the Prophet, of course, but he's more impressive in person. He doesn't take himself any more seriously than he should. I said that thing about Harry being more important partly because I wanted to see how he would react. From what I've heard, Fudge would have gotten all upset and defensive, even though it was true. And yes, Neville, you were right. After you said that, I felt like I should have thought of it myself. Thank goodness he isn't like Fudge, the decision would have been a bit harder."

"Do you really think we should consider how good a Minister he is when making that kind of decision?" asked Pansy,

surprised. "Neville's argument doesn't consider whether he's competent or not."

"I suppose," conceded Hermione. "It's just harder to contemplate risking Harry's life for someone like Fudge. I think I meant it would be harder emotionally, not logically."

"I don't feel like this is risking my life, though," said Harry, still with a determined look. "Not that nothing could happen, I know it could. I won't be overconfident. But the next time I face him will be the first time I do knowing that I can do this to him. That gives me quite a bit of confidence. I don't have to worry about dueling him, I can just do this. The only thing I have to worry about with him is walking into a trap, and that won't happen with this, because the places I'll be going are Bright's home and office, which will already be protected; he'll have a hard enough time getting in, never mind setting up something nasty waiting for me."

"That makes sense," agreed Hermione. "A good rule of thumb would be to try never to go anywhere that he's had a chance to be at for a while. Of course, that's not always possible. They can do a huge Apparation ambush, for example, and we don't have much choice but to go there. At least if we do, forty Aurors will be around."

Harry moved over to near Ginny, who looked unhappy. He took her hand and asked, "Are you upset?"

She shrugged. "Not upset exactly, definitely not at you. I know why you want to get him, and I don't blame you. It's just what I said before, I hate the idea of you being in any danger at all."

"But if he attacks, he'll be in more danger than me—"

"I know, Harry. It's not rational. I know you have to face him sooner or later, and he'll be on the defensive if he's at Bright's home or office. He probably won't do it at all, for that reason. It's just the idea. I haven't forgotten that cry I had at St. Mungo's yesterday. The reasons for doing this are good, which is why I didn't argue against it when he was here. Believe me, if I was dead set against it, I'd have let you know. This is an emotional reaction."

He moved next to her and put an arm around her. "I can understand that. Funny, I have an emotional reaction too, mine is just to go after him. But I'm sure Hermione was right yesterday, this is harder for you than it is for me. I'm sorry."

She kissed him on the cheek. "There's nothing for you to be sorry about," she assured him.

"I know. I just meant I'm sorry that you have to go through all this. But there is something I have to tell you that might cheer you up."

"You got me another ring?" she asked, feigning excitement.

Harry smiled. "No, I think this is better than that."

Her eyebrows rose, as did some of the others'. "What would be better than that?"

"Something that Albus talked to me about last night," he explained. "I thought about telling you alone, but the rest of you would find out soon enough, and I'd rather you heard it from me." He saw that Ginny and the others were now quite curious as to what he would say. "First of all, you know how I've said that if you think of Albus in a focused way, he'll hear what you're saying. Apparently Professor McGonagall took advantage of that to let me know something she didn't want to say directly to me, or through anyone living."

"Part of the memory Hermione showed her in the Pensieve of what happened yesterday included your cry that you just mentioned. Albus said that she felt awful for you too, and understands how hard this is for you. She also knows that we haven't used my quarters for what we used it for in the summer, even though it wasn't clear whether she'd mind if we did or not. I don't know how she knows, but she does. He said she appreciates the fact that we didn't push that. So, in view of all the stuff we have to go through, and probably will, she had Albus tell me that once a week, for an hour, we can go there if we want to." He smiled as he saw surprise and pleasure quickly appear on Ginny's face. "The only conditions are that we're discreet enough that no one outside the six of us knows, and that we never mention it or refer to it to her. She wants to be able to pretend that it isn't happening."

Ginny was now grinning broadly. "I can do that."

The others chuckled. "I bet you can," said Pansy.

"You're right, this is better than another ring," said Ginny, still very happy. "I wish I could thank her, but I'll live with the fact that I can't. It's so funny how she's like that, that she can't manage to say that to your face."

Harry had had the same thought. "Yeah, I got the feeling Albus was kind of amused, too. Well, it was nice of her to do it, she didn't have to."

"Yes, definitely," agreed Ginny. "Well, everyone, Harry and I have to go. We'll be back in an hour."

The others laughed. "No, let's wait until we would have been done here anyway," suggested Harry. "There's no hurry."

"I was kidding, of course," replied Ginny, "but we do have to think about not being interrupted. You've got the Aurors tomorrow, right?"

Neville nodded. "Yeah, I talked to them last night, they're going to do the training tomorrow instead of today, give Harry a bit of time to recover. Of course, he'll need more time to recover after you're done with him."

Everyone laughed, even Harry a little. "I don't know, Neville, it's only an hour," joked Ginny. "It's good for him, anyway."

"Yes, they do want us to be in good physical condition," agreed Neville. "I don't think they care exactly how we go about doing it. Say," he added, turning to Hermione, "won't you be getting teachers' quarters, now that you're a teacher?"

"From next year, for sure. I assume there are empty quarters somewhere, waiting for me, but I'm not going to ask her about it. Harry was a teacher for all of last year and didn't have quarters. But she's not—and yes, I know you were joking—she wouldn't let us do it anyway."

"I felt kind of bad about that," admitted Harry. "I'd like you guys to be able to do it, too."

"Harry, you're a special case," said Pansy. "You and Ginny have all this stress. I know we do too, but it's much worse for you. I think this is why McGonagall is keeping it so unofficial, she doesn't want the whole 'if they can do it why can't we' thing. We don't begrudge you this."

"Obviously not, don't worry about it," agreed Ron. "Well, we should get to our studying, I'm sure Hermione can't wait to get at all those books. I'll bet there's all kinds of things I've forgotten from first-year Transfiguration."

"I'll be sure to call on you in our next class, then," teased Hermione.

"You'd better not," warned Ron. "No more often than McGonagall did, anyway."

"She never called on you," pointed out Hermione.

Ron looked at the others with a put-on impressed expression. "See, there's that quick mind of hers again. She grasped my point instantly."

Hermione's response was pre-empted by a knock on the door. The others looked at each other in surprise again. "McGonagall this time?" wondered Neville. With a shrug, Hermione pointed her wand at the door, which opened to reveal Hedrick and Helen.

They gaped, as Harry realized that they had been looking into a previously empty classroom which suddenly had six people in it. "Cool!" enthused Hedrick.

"I'd love to learn that spell," said Helen as they walked into the room.

"I'll teach you when you're a seventh year," joked Hermione. "I only just learned it myself."

"How did you know we were here?" asked Neville.

Hedrick held up the Marauders' Map. "Professor Potter gave us this last year, after Hermione made you your maps; we used it to keep track of Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. We don't have that much use for it these days, but now we're afraid we might."

"You mean, the wasps," said Pansy.

Helen nodded. "Of course, we're worried that Marcus might have done it. We're sure you've thought of that, but we still wanted to check."

"We don't think it was him," said Harry. "Professor McGonagall doesn't either, because they would have escaped when the magic went out, if he had brought them into Hogwarts. Don't tell anyone outside the ten of you that she said that, by the way. Anyway, we don't know how they got in, and we probably won't be able to find out easily, but we're pretty sure it wasn't him."

"Have you talked to him, gotten to know him at all?" asked Hermione.

"A little bit," said Helen. "We don't get too many chances to talk to first years, we kind of have to go out of our way to do it. But we talked to him a little the night the magic went away, and the next day, because of the idea that it was already decided that he was a Slytherin. He seemed all right, a little quiet, maybe. He didn't seem that different from anyone else, and he was really impressed with what you guys did that night. Which, obviously, everyone was. We didn't ask him about his family, of course. At least, he doesn't act like the other sons of Death Eaters. So, we hope he'll be okay."

"I think he will be," said Harry encouragingly. "He's been like that in my classes too, just a normal student. Also, I discovered-and please don't repeat this either-that his father hasn't lived at home since Voldemort came back, and his mother doesn't like Death Eaters. So, we really think he'll be all right."

"We'll check the map sometimes, just to be sure," said Hedrick. "Not only him, just anyone really out of place."

Ginny glanced at Harry, then spoke to Hedrick. "Um, speaking of that, there will be times when Harry and I are out of place, in Harry's living quarters. It's important that you not mention that to other people outside the ten of you."

"Okay, but why not?" asked Hedrick innocently.

Smiling, Helen rolled her eyes. "I'll explain it when we tell the others about this."

"So," said Ron, "have you heard about our last Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, at least until Harry was attacked?" Harry wondered if he was trying to distract Hedrick from asking further questions.

"Of course, we always ask Pansy to tell us what happened after every lesson," said Helen. Looking at Ron's face, she added, "Oh, you mean the hugging thing. Well, we all hugged Pansy, so that was a good start. But I think it's going to be hard for the boys."

"Why us especially?" asked Hedrick defensively.

"Because boys are more uncomfortable with that than girls, everyone knows that," said Helen, with a mild air of superiority.

Harry decided he'd better nip that sort of attitude in the bud. "Helen, if anyone's uncomfortable with it—boy or girl—you should try to be understanding and encouraging, not criticize them. It would have been really hard for me when I was your age."

Abashed, she nodded. She was about to say something when Hedrick tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to face him, and he quickly stepped up to her and hugged her,

obviously taking her by surprise. She gave a mild start, then slowly put her arms around him. Harry and his friends all exchanged smiles. He couldn't see Hedrick's face, but he could tell that Helen seemed genuinely pleased.

The hug lasted a few seconds longer than Harry expected, then they broke off from each other. "See, that wasn't so hard," said Hedrick, smiling in mild embarrassment.

"No, it wasn't," agreed Helen.

"It gets easier the more you do it," said Pansy, with a wide smile. "We can work on it some more this weekend."

"Okay," said Hedrick. "Ron, could you do some flying with us this weekend, too?"

"Sure," agreed Ron. "How about tomorrow morning at ten?"

"Okay, we'll tell the others. Thanks." Hedrick and Helen left, and anticipating no further interruptions, Harry and his friends took out their books and started studying.

Harry and Hermione left the Great Hall on Monday immediately after finishing lunch, heading for the staff room. He glanced at her as they walked; he could see excitement and anticipation on her face. He felt like teasing her, but just decided to let her enjoy the moment. As they approached the staff room, Flora suddenly appeared, and settled on Hermione's shoulder; Hermione smiled and reached up to pet her. Fawkes appeared a few seconds later, and perched on Harry's shoulder as he opened the door.

He entered, followed by Hermione. The only staff members missing from the room were Trelawney, Svengard, and of course, Hagrid. Upon seeing Hermione, everyone except Snape broke into applause, which a smiling Harry quickly

joined. McGonagall stepped forward and extended a hand. "Welcome to the staff room, Professor Granger."

Beaming, Hermione shook it. "Thank you, Professor, and thank you, everyone. I'm so happy to be here."

Sprout walked up to Hermione and took both of Hermione's hands in hers. "We're very pleased to have you, dear. I imagine we all thought at one time or another we'd see you in here one day. It's just sooner than we thought, due to Minerva's desire to take it easy."

Harry and a few other teachers chuckled. "I would explain in detail how much work is involved in being headmistress," said McGonagall casually, "if I thought you were serious. Professor Dumbledore simply made it look easy."

"Did you have any classes this morning?" asked John, as Harry sat on the sofa, Hermione next to him.

"Yes, I had second year Hufflepuff/Slytherin. It went fine. I was a little nervous, but it helped that they were Harry's Slytherins, so they knew me, and were being nice." Harry couldn't help but glance at Snape when she referred to the Slytherins as being his, but Snape had no visible reaction.

"How did they become 'Harry's'?" wondered Dentus.

"It's just what we call them," explained Hermione. "Harry sort of bonded with them at the beginning of last year, when he showed them how they could overthrow Malfoy."

John chuckled. "You make it sound like a coup d'etat."

"It was, really," said Hermione, as Harry wondered what the phrase meant. "Malfoy ruled the Slytherin common room because no one dared to stand up to him. Harry explained

that it was a matter of them sticking together, like we have to stick together to fight Voldemort. They did, and it worked. They've been a very tight group ever since."

"From adversity comes strength," commented Dentus. "I assume that he was roughly the local bully. What made them do it? First years are usually kind of timid, especially at first."

"They liked Harry, and his class," said Hermione. "You don't know this, but the other teachers would. Malfoy always hated Harry, and he couldn't deal with anyone in Slytherin contradicting him. He tried to bully them into silence, but it didn't work, and the other students started resisting once they saw it could be done."

"Very interesting," mused Dentus. "It's like a microcosm of what was happening in the real world. Thanks, I'll keep that in mind when teaching the second years. I may be able to give them some historical examples that'll remind them of what they did."

"And so, Harry became their hero even before he became everyone else's," said Sprout, with an amused glance at Harry.

"Professor Sprout," said Harry to Hermione, "does in here what Pansy usually does with the six of us, she's the most likely to tease me about my status and my reactions to it."

"What status do you mean, Harry?" asked Sprout perfectly innocently, as if she wasn't sure what Harry was talking about.

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, right." To Hermione, he said, "Now she's trying to embarrass me by getting me to say what it is."

Sprout shrugged, as if to suggest she couldn't be blamed for trying. "He's getting smarter," she said to Hermione. "Last year, he'd have fallen for that. Of course, last year he'd have fallen for almost anything. They grow up so fast."

"Kingsley said the same thing a few months ago, the first time I beat him dueling."

Flitwick whistled. "That really is impressive, beating the strongest Auror before your seventeenth birthday. How do you do against him now?"

"I win about a quarter of the time, I guess. He says I've still got a few years until I catch up to him on skill."

"Really, Harry," said McGonagall, deadpan, "it's so unlike you to boast."

Harry looked at Hermione to see her grinning; she obviously enjoyed seeing McGonagall tease Harry. "I mentioned it because it's funny that both she and Kingsley would say the same thing. It's as if I'm a child, with you and with the Aurors." His tone made clear that he wasn't bothered, just making an observation.

"In a way you are," said John. "You're a prodigy, really, manifesting far-above-adult-average abilities when not yet an adult, not only with your courage, but with your strength and the energy of love, which aren't the same but are related. Prodigies get thrust into the adult world before they're ready for it, in most cases. You weren't quite ready for it, but weren't far from it, and you've adapted well. It doesn't mean you're a child, of course, just as close to one as will ever be in this room. Fortunately, if you're a child, you're a cuddly one, not a bratty one."

Harry chuckled. "Thanks. Good thing this didn't happen in fifth year, though. I'd have been pretty bratty."

"I confess, Harry," said McGonagall seriously, "that I questioned Professor Dumbledore's decision to make you a teacher even when he did. I did not doubt your ability to do the job well, but was concerned about your maturity. He responded that he was confident that you would grow into the job, and as usual, he was correct." With a small smile at her own expense, she continued, "Most of the times I questioned his judgment I was wrong, but he preferred that I do so anyway. He said it 'kept him on his toes.'"

"I always felt," said Flitwick, "that he was very much on his toes, all the time."

"Not always," said Sprout. "There was that unpleasantness two years ago..."

"Could he really be blamed for that?" asked Hermione.

"He thought so," said Harry. "He said he shouldn't have let it come to that."

"Unfortunately, he was correct," put in Dentus. "Had he stayed better connected politically, he would have had sufficient warning, and avoided what happened. He was somewhat complacent, though, having run Hogwarts for so many years without outside interference, and we all know he preferred to stay away from the muck that politics often is. Instead, he got caught with his wand in his pocket."

"What?" asked Harry.

"The Muggle equivalent," explained John, "would be, 'he got caught with his pants down.'"

"Ah," said Harry.

"What a lovely metaphor," said McGonagall dryly. "It is fortunate that wizards need not wear pants."

"Anyway, Harry," said Dentus, "there was a little object lesson for you in that, if you hadn't noticed."

"No, I actually noticed. It's the kind of thing you usually say, just with a very clear illustration of the dangers."

"Well," said McGonagall, "fortunately I have the same political advisor that Harry does, so we may hope that such a thing will not happen again for quite some time. Not to mention a Minister of Magic who knows which way is up."

"Yes, it does seem as though this one's a keeper," agreed Sprout. "Is he as good as he seems, Professor Dentus? You know him, after all."

"It depends on whether you mean, good person, or good politician," said Dentus. "A good politician, definitely. A good person... that's a lot harder to tell, in a politician. I don't know him well enough to know that."

Sprout nodded. "I suppose it's not always easy to know that, even in someone who's not a politician." After a pause, she glanced at Harry and Hermione on the sofa, phoenixes on their shoulders. "I'm just wondering, is there some reason you have them with you like this? Or is one here because the other is?"

"Well, most of the time when they're with us like this, it's because they decided, not us," explained Harry. "But I do know why they're here now." Hermione glanced at him in surprise; clearly she didn't know. "Flora is here because Hermione is very excited to come into the staff room. The

feeling attracts her, she wants to be closer to Hermione while Hermione feels it. Fawkes came partly because he and Flora like to be together while Hermione and I are together, and partly because he likes it when Flora feels like she feels because of Hermione."

"Spreading joy throughout the phoenix world," joked Sprout. "So, does any of this spill over onto you, Harry?"

"I wondered that myself, actually," said McGonagall seriously.

Harry thought about it. "It's hard to say, because I'd know that Hermione was excited even without them, and I'm happy for her. So, it's spilling over onto me in the way normal for humans. It's not easy to tell if the phoenixes are affecting it or not."

"Do they ever interact physically when they're together?" asked John. "Like, engage in grooming behavior, things like that?"

"Not really, no," answered Hermione. "Their interaction is more mental than physical. The closest they get to that is that sometimes they stand right next to each other."

"How's your communication coming along?" asked Sprout.

"Slowly but surely," said Hermione. "I don't think it's as good as it's going to get, but it's good. For me, it's just a matter of getting used to it. It helps to have Harry and Fawkes around, though. A few times we've done this thing where we tested my ability to get things from Flora. Harry comes up with something—an image or an impression, the kind of thing he knows phoenixes communicate. He sends it to Fawkes, who sends it to Flora. She sends it to me, and we see if I get the same thing Harry sent. Usually I do, and I know it's from

Harry. Flora sends an image of Harry, a particular one with Fawkes on his shoulder, that's her way of letting me know it's from him. Lately, Harry's been doing it partly as a way of teaching me phoenix shorthand, the kind he learned from Fawkes. It also teaches Flora, which is nice, since I'm her first companion."

"That sounds fascinating," said Sprout. "Would you do one for us? Harry, whisper to me and Minerva what you're going to try to communicate before you do it."

He did, then focused on what he wanted Fawkes to relay. There was silence in the room for a minute, then Hermione spoke. "I think it's just that we have Potions with Professor Snape on Wednesday."

Harry nodded to her, as McGonagall and Sprout looked impressed. To the others, he explained, "I sent the shorthand for two days, which is two sunsets, and an image of Professor Snape in the Potions dungeon."

"Could you have done it by sending only the image of the Potions dungeon," wondered Flitwick, "or only an image of Professor Snape?"

"Yes, it would just be a different emphasis. The first one would have emphasized the class, and the second, that it was Professor Snape who was teaching it. The way I sent it, they're kind of equally emphasized. But the second could also have meant that I, she, or we would meet Professor Snape in two days; it's only the fact that we know we have him for Potions that would make it mean what it does."

"Would you do another one?" asked Sprout. "Something... less specific, less factual."

"Okay," agreed Harry. He thought for a minute, then walked over to Sprout and McGonagall and whispered to them. They looked surprised as he took his seat and began focusing.

This one took a little less than a minute; Hermione looked at him with surprise. "Are you saying that I shouldn't worry about the Ravenclaws in tomorrow's seventh year Transfiguration class?"

Again, Harry nodded. "That was what he said, almost exactly," said McGonagall.

"But how did you know that I was worried about that?" she asked, in mild disbelief. "Not only didn't I tell you that, I didn't tell anyone!"

"Well, Flora knows," pointed out Harry. "Of course, phoenixes don't understand things in the same terms we do. She doesn't know exactly what it is you're concerned about, she just knows you're concerned. Very recently, I think while we were eating lunch, I got an image of you in front of a class, with lots of the Ravenclaw students in it, and a feeling of anxiety. I assume it means that you're worried that the Ravenclaws won't necessarily respect you as a teacher, or look for ways to test you, prove to them that you're qualified."

"I'm impressed that you worked that out," said Hermione. Harry chuckled, as did a few teachers. "I don't mean that, that you're so slow you couldn't have," she protested. "It just doesn't seem like that much information."

"I should understand, I felt that way a bit when you roped me into doing the D.A. in fifth year. There were a few students who were older than I was, so it's no surprise that I'd feel like that."

McGonagall nodded understandingly. "I think most of us have felt that way when we started, Hermione. Well, except Archibald, perhaps. Most of us don't start in our sixties."

"No, I was actually worried that Hermione would poke holes in my historical knowledge," said Dentus, with a small grin.

"I think most of us have felt that way about Hermione," agreed Sprout. "I don't think you have much to worry about from the Ravenclaws, dear. Harry, how did you send the message you did?"

"I just sent back the same image, with emotional impressions of calm and confidence."

"Fascinating," marveled Sprout, as a few others nodded. "But it does raise some privacy issues, doesn't it?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged a knowing smile. "I became his Legilimency practice partner shortly before Professor Dumbledore died," said Hermione. "So there aren't many privacy issues with us anyway."

Harry noted many teachers' surprised looks. "Besides, it's not like they're going to be exchanging information on us all the time. I think Flora sent that one along because she recognized it as something I might be able to help her with, maybe make her feel better about. She definitely wasn't gossiping."

"I don't think Professor Sprout was suggesting that either Fawkes or Flora acted inappropriately," pointed out Flitwick. "Just that as a general matter, such a close connection could cause complications. Then again, given that only one out of every how many thousand wizards become phoenix companions, the chances that two people as close as you

would be chosen must not be high. I wonder if there have ever been any married companions."

"Or, as this situation is close to, partnered phoenixes companioning married people," suggested Sprout.

Hermione shook her head. Harry had read this in *Reborn From the Ashes* as well, but he decided to let her answer the question. "The only companions who have ever been married were ones who met after they became companions, usually much later in life. There's nothing in the literature about how closely connected the phoenixes themselves were. But yes, our situation is probably as close as it gets to that. It should be interesting."

As McGonagall changed the subject, asking Hermione more detailed questions about the class she'd taught, he imagined himself and Hermione fifty years older, sitting in the headmaster's office talking, phoenixes on their shoulders. A few seconds later, she glanced over at him with a slightly surprised look, and he wondered if Fawkes had sent that image over. Then he wondered how Fawkes would decide what to send and not to send, and he understood that he had to trust Fawkes's judgment. He knew he trusted it a lot more than he did his own.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 14, *The Empty Dormitory*: Pansy and Thomas bring Harry a problem he fervently wishes they hadn't, as it triggers such aggressive behavior in Snape that Harry's ability to help him is threatened.

From Chapter 14: "You are correct when you say that Severus violated the understanding you had regarding how information obtained from you was to be used, but you may wish to consider that he did not do so willfully, in a sense.

This subject is so sensitive for him that one could almost say he was not in control of his actions. Even so, it is understandable that you found it necessary to have the Memory Charm done."

14. Chapter 14

Chapter 14

The Empty Dormitory

Four weeks later, Harry and Ron walked across the Hogwarts grounds, just having finished an hour-long fly. "Oh, I miss Quidditch," said Ron wistfully, for what Harry guessed was the twentieth time in the past two months. Still, Harry felt he couldn't blame Ron.

"Me, too," he agreed. "At least McGonagall says the new stadium is being built on schedule, so it'll probably be finished in January."

Ron didn't look very reassured. "I don't see why they don't at least let us practice. There's plenty of airspace, even if we don't use what's above where the stadium should be."

Harry glanced at him in surprise. "I thought you agreed that practicing wouldn't be the same without a proper set of hoops."

Ron appeared mildly chagrined that he had ever said such a thing. "That was before going two months without any Quidditch. I'm really starting to feel it now, since this is about when we'd be playing our first match."

Harry shrugged. "I know. But as I'm sure you know, I can't pick the Slytherins' team without hoops, and it's not fair for them not to have a team while the rest of us practice. And before you say anything, I'm aware of the irony of talking about what's fair to the Slytherins."

"Just so long as you're aware of it."

"How are the second years doing with their flying, by the way?"

"Not bad," said Ron, with some pride. "They're getting the hang of it, and they're surprisingly disciplined for a bunch of second years. I have to admit that I was just sort of humoring them when I started, but it's turned into kind of a nice project for me. I've spent some of the last few Saturdays in the library researching broom-based battle information, which of course Hermione had some fun with me about. Like, that seeing me in the library is like seeing her on the Quidditch pitch."

"I can understand that," said Harry. "You'd probably say the same thing if she suddenly started flying for fun."

"I probably would," conceded Ron. "Anyway, I'm getting pretty interested in the whole concept of combat flying, probably because there are elements of it that are a little similar to the kind of flying you do in Quidditch. And since I'm Quidditch-starved right now, this is the next best thing."

"Funny, I was planning on starting to teach it the week after next, and starting to research it myself later today. You could point me to the right books. Then again, I could just turn the class over to you for that."

"Hadn't thought of that," said Ron. "I suppose you could, since I've been teaching the second years. Of course, you should research it and know it anyway, but if you want me to demonstrate something or teach it, sure, I wouldn't mind. D'you want to go to the library and get started now?"

"No, not now, though I am going there. Hermione and I are going to do our Legilimency practice in a few minutes."

Ron nodded. "So, how's that going?"

"Pretty good," replied Harry, as they approached the castle entrance. "I feel like I'm getting better all the time. I'm improving both at viewing memories and discovering lies. Hermione and I are doing this thing lately where we always check each other, and we deliberately lie to each other every now and then, as a test to see if the other person catches it. But it can't be something the other person would know was a lie anyway. Like, I said I was taking the N.E.W.T.s very seriously, and she just looked at me like, you have to do better than that."

"Hard to think of anyone who needs N.E.W.T.s less than you," agreed Ron. "In the library, Hermione's always telling me I should study more Herbology or Transfiguration, to prepare for the N.E.W.T.s. To be honest, she's probably right, since in the winter and spring there'll be lots of Quidditch practice. She must have gotten through to Pansy, though, because Pansy's really serious now about studying. She's usually been so-so about it, like the rest of us except Hermione, but she's spending a lot of time in the library too."

"I hadn't known that in particular," said Harry, "but I had noticed that when we study together in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, she seems pretty focused on the books. I just assumed she was always that way, since we'd never studied with her before."

"I don't think so," said Ron. "I don't have the impression that they were very big on studying." Harry understood that 'they' referred to Malfoy and whoever else studied with him; he couldn't imagine that Crabbe or Goyle ever actually studied.

"I assume that's something you'd prefer not to think about," said Harry.

The look on Ron's face told Harry that he had made a vast understatement. Glancing around to make sure they weren't being overheard, he said, "Don't get me wrong, I love her and I know she's totally changed. And I'd never say anything about it, because I know how it affects her. But you could say it was a bit of a hurdle to get past when we got together. So, yes, I really do try not to think about it." Harry guessed that Ron was admitting that the length of time it took for him and Pansy to become a couple was at least somewhat affected by that consideration. Given how close Pansy had been to Malfoy, Harry found he couldn't blame Ron at all.

They entered the library and found Hermione at a table in front of her usual pile of books, Pansy opposite with a much smaller pile. Subtly putting a hand on Pansy's shoulder and keeping his voice down so as not to draw the attention of Madam Pince, Ron said, "Hi, how's it going?"

She glanced up at them, putting her hand on top of his. "Not bad. You know, hard as usual. Except for Harry's class, of course, which is pretty easy."

"Glad I could help," responded Harry. "It's all part of my plan to be an extremely popular teacher."

"It seems to be working," said Hermione. "I assume you're here for..." She trailed off, not wanting to say the word 'Legilimency' at any volume. He nodded, and she picked up her books, put them into her bag, and got up as Ron sat next to Pansy.

"Where are Ginny and Neville?" asked Harry as they headed out of the library and towards Harry's office.

"I think they're studying in the common room," said Hermione. "Neither needed to use the library especially." Harry understood that most people preferred to study in the common room, as people could speak at whatever volume they wanted to. "Speaking of studying, it's interesting how it works out. You have the easiest schedule, but because of teaching you're the busiest. The only study-intensive classes you have are Transfiguration and Potions."

"And I can take it easy in Transfiguration, since I'm a good friend of the teacher," joked Harry.

"You were a friend of the teacher before, and it really didn't matter," she responded. "Anyway, it's not me you have to worry about, it's the N.E.W.T. I know, you don't care especially, but I do hope you'll at least manage an 'Acceptable.' If you become headmaster, it won't look good to the students if you failed one of the important N.E.W.T.s."

Harry thought it was funny that Hermione would think of that. "I think most students didn't know, and didn't care, how many N.E.W.T.s Albus got. They probably just assumed he got a lot, like I did. Maybe if I'm headmaster, people will assume I got a lot, and not research it."

She gave him a penetrating look. "I'm not trying to bother you, but I do wonder something... whenever it comes up about you being headmaster in the future, you seem kind of... I don't know, solemn, maybe. My impression was that you'd rather not think about it, or that you don't want to do it but think you will anyway. Am I right?"

They walked in silence as he mulled it over. Finally, he said, "The first, I guess. It's not so much that I mind the idea, it really is an honor. I think it's that I feel like being an Auror is what I want to do, and staying here is what I feel like I

should do, the most logical thing to do. I remember talking to Ron after a fly, the day after Albus died. He said he was taking so long to let Pansy know how he felt because they were the only two of the six not paired up, and he wanted to be sure that if they did it, it was for the right reasons, not because it just seemed like the natural thing to do. I feel like if I decide to stay here, it should be because I want to, not because I feel like I should. If that makes any sense."

"I can definitely understand that," she assured him. "It is your life, after all. Maybe I shouldn't make jokes about it, that probably doesn't help."

"I don't think it matters," he said, as he opened the door to his office and saw Fawkes and Flora standing on his desk. "Hello, you two," he said, now smiling. Soon after Flora joined Hermione, the two phoenixes had taken to being present during Harry and Hermione's Legilimency sessions. "I bet I know what Fawkes would prefer I do."

She gave him a reproachful look. "You are joking, I hope. You know very well that he'd want you to do whatever made you happiest."

"I know," he said as they sat in their chairs. "I was mostly kidding. It's probably better to say that he'll be pleased if this is what I decide I want to do, since you and I would be spending a lot of time together."

"You should be completely kidding, since you know better." She opened his desk drawer with her wand, and the Pensieve floated out and landed at her side. She extracted a memory as usual, then asked, "So, who'll go first?"

"You go ahead," he said. "Are you going to try to view memories again?"

She nodded. "I want to keep working on that, it's good practice." He cleared his mind, and she pointed her wand at him. Soon he felt a memory playing in his head, of events that occurred during the trial in early September of the previous year in which Voldemort had invaded Harry's dreams, prompting him to find the first of the energy-of-love spells. After fifteen minutes, she changed her focus, and moved ahead to the first Hogsmeade weekend of that year. Harry remembered his conversation with Professor Dumbledore the day before the first Quidditch match. As he felt Hermione view it, he was again impressed by the fact that she could view it in much better detail than he could remember it himself. She quickly glanced at their lunchtime conversation and their lesson with Professor Dumbledore, and viewed in more detail his later conversation with Pansy. A few minutes later, Hermione put down her wand for a break.

"You really didn't take her very seriously, about her warning," she gently chided him. "It's interesting how I get your emotional perspective from these memories. I guess it's more accurate to say that you didn't take the threat seriously, you were sure there was nothing Malfoy could do to you."

He shrugged. "I wasn't really thinking about artifacts."

"It's that, but also that you didn't take threats very seriously in general. Ironically, now you do—at least, more than before—but there's quite a bit less that can threaten you."

"Probably artifacts, mostly," agreed Harry. "Not that I couldn't be killed any other way, but of course I've been studying lots of defenses against advanced Dark magic, both from books and working with Snape. I think I could deal with most of what they could throw at me. But it's hard to

defend against artifacts. Like, what would I do against a Confundus Beam?"

"There must be some way to defend against it," said Hermione. "I guess I should try to research artifacts, at least the known ones, and defenses against them."

"No, I should do it. You're really busy now, especially since you're teaching ten hours a week as well as taking nine classes. Not that I'm not busy, but as you pointed out, I don't have that much homework."

"Well, I won't argue with you, but maybe I'll help you find the books, get started. So, are you ready to continue?"

Harry nodded, and she pointed her wand at him again; again he was calm, not resisting. After a minute of searching, she found where she had left off, at the point just before she had entered the room that day a year ago. In his mind, Harry saw Hermione proudly display and explain the new maps, and recalled how impressed he'd been. Then he saw Pansy ask Hermione why she'd never fallen in love with him, and Hermione's answer. As she answered, in his memory, he recalled what he had been thinking: that part of the reason he hadn't thought of her romantically was her bossiness and tendency to control, that he wouldn't want to live his life dealing with that. In the present, he saw her face fall, and realized with a start that she was experiencing the memory as he was. She put down her wand and withdrew from his mind, then looked off to Harry's left, her expression crestfallen.

He felt awful, but he paused, not knowing what to say. Tears came to her eyes, and in seconds she was sobbing, her head down. He wanted to hold her, but felt as though he shouldn't, considering that he was the one who had caused

her distress. The phoenixes showed no reaction; Harry wondered what they were thinking.

Finally, he felt he had to say something. "Hermione, I'm so sorry—"

Through her sobs, she cut him off with a gesture. She started making an obvious effort to rein in her emotions. "It's not your fault," she said through the last of her tears. "We all have our thoughts, you can't blame yourself for that. Besides, you were right." As she said that, new tears seemed to threaten. "Most men wouldn't want that. I was lucky you and Ron put up with me being like that, even as a friend."

"Oh, come on, that's not true," he protested vigorously. "It's not like Ron and I didn't have our things that annoyed you. We all have things like that, at least I assume we do. I know I do, you know how unpleasant I was to deal with in fifth year, for example. Looking back on that, I could easily wonder how you put up with me. It wasn't a very nice thing of me to think, I just..."

"Never thought anybody would see what you thought," she finished for him. She paused a minute, her immediate emotional reaction having passed. Harry waited for her to speak, as she obviously had more to say; he fervently hoped that his friendship with her wouldn't suffer because of what had happened.

"I want to lie to you, and just say, 'it's okay, don't worry about it,' but I couldn't really lie to you anyway," she said.

He knew she wasn't finished, but cut in before she could continue. "Hermione, I'm hardly going to be checking you right now."

"I know, but you know it happens automatically sometimes in emotional situations, which this is," she pointed out.

"Anyway, it hurts, I'm not going to deny that. And not because of some idea that I had a chance at you and missed it, of course. It's just because it's so true. It bothered Neville, even though he didn't say anything about it until the Skeeter thing happened, and he knew I was like that beforehand. It also hurts because it was one of the main things Skeeter used to hurt me, it very much has that association.

"But you have a right to your thoughts, and you shouldn't feel bad about it. That this happened is just because of what we're doing; humans aren't used to sharing their thoughts like phoenixes do. If you think something, you assume it'll go no further, and that's reasonable. You know I've read a few books about Legilimency; one of them said that doing what we're doing is much more intimate than being naked around someone, in some ways more intimate than sex. We don't tend to think about that aspect of it much, but it is true. It could destroy a relationship fast unless the people make efforts to make sure that it doesn't happen. That's another reason I didn't put you off and say everything was all right; you'd know soon enough that it wasn't, and it would just be worse. It can take the same kind of effort that maintaining a married relationship can take. We have to face up to that, and this is a good example of why."

He shook his head. "I'm sure you're right, I just don't feel like I'm good at dealing with this kind of thing. I mean, I'm still stuck on, 'I'm really sorry.' I feel terrible that I even thought that—"

"It was true. You can't keep apologizing for something you thought, something that was true."

"Maybe that's what I mean when I say I'm not good at dealing with it. It's hard to think about anything but that I feel bad for hurting you."

"Harry, do you want to help me?" she asked, raising her voice a little. "You can help me, or you can sit there feeling bad that I got hurt. It's up to you."

He felt as though she'd slapped him in the face, but it got his attention. "I'm sorry, I'll try." He focused on the situation, trying to be as rational as possible. After a minute, he said, "I do understand what you mean. You're right... I knew this was intimate, but I never really thought about it like this. I guess I only thought of it being intimate in a good way, like when we see memories of our friendship, how we love each other."

She nodded a little. "That's understandable, since there's far more of that kind of thing, and we tend to seek it out anyway. This is the kind of thing that comes up by accident. Harry... this doesn't matter, but I feel like I'm going to wonder if I don't ask you. Was that just a passing thought, or was it something you'd thought about consciously, more than once?"

Embarrassed but determined to be honest, he searched his memory. "I'm pretty sure that until that point, I'd never had a conscious thought like that. I guess when I had the thought, I assumed that it was the unconscious reason I'd never thought of you that way. Well, that's not true, obviously I'd thought about it. I don't think you could be friends like we were and never have thought about that. It's just that most of the time I was way too young, or focused on Cho, then worried about the idea of having a girlfriend. If I thought about it, it was a passing thought, and I never thought, 'oh, no way, because of such-and such.' It was more like, it didn't enter my mind much at all. I mean, at that

point, I had barely thought about Ginny in that way either. It was your getting together with Neville that made me start thinking about having a girlfriend in the first place."

"I can understand why. And I'm sorry I was checking you." He had noticed, but decided not to say anything. "I was just afraid you might lie to me to spare my feelings, it would be a natural impulse if you'd had more of those kind of thoughts." She shook her head as if angry with herself, then continued, "This really shouldn't bother me, especially not this much. I love Neville, and I wouldn't trade him for anyone, including you. I'm not the same anymore, at least, I'm trying not to be. And it was just a passing thought." She looked at him, with a small smile, her expression a mix of emotions that seemed to include sadness and vulnerability. "So, do you think I can talk myself out of feeling bad?"

Already highly emotional because of what had happened, he felt intense sympathy for her, followed quickly by an equally intense feeling of love, stronger than he had ever felt before except for Ginny. Memories of their friendship flashed through his mind, all they had gone through together, suffered together, celebrated together. He knew how lucky he was to have her in his life. He looked at her, wanting her to know how he felt, and on an impulse silently asked Fawkes to send what he was feeling to Hermione through Flora.

A few seconds later, she smiled, and he could tell from her face that his message had been received loud and clear. She stood and hugged him; he held her tightly, pouring his feelings into it. "Thank you," she said, now holding him equally tightly. "I think I knew you felt that way, but actually feeling what you're feeling is a different thing altogether. It's so strange... I can feel how much you love me, how important I am to you." She paused, then added, "Well, I

think you managed to talk me out of feeling bad, even without saying anything."

He smiled, wondering if it would be transmitted and she would feel it though she couldn't see it. "It's the energy of love."

She chuckled, continuing to hold him. "It really is. And there's something I want to say to you." He waited for her to continue, but she said nothing. Instead, he received an impression from Fawkes, a feeling of love similar to the one he'd sent out, along with an image of Hermione and Flora. The feeling was slightly different from what he would feel; he guessed that each person's feelings of love would feel a bit different, like voices or handwriting were different. One impression he got strongly from what she sent was that she felt connected to him in a way that she felt was very special. Not like a married relationship, but closer than even a close friend. He wasn't sure there was a word for it, but he knew he felt it too. He sent what he was feeling through Fawkes.

"Thank you," she said, her voice heavy with emotion. She gave him a last squeeze, then let go of him and sat back down, which he did as well. "I wasn't sure you felt exactly that way about me, I'm glad that you do. It certainly makes what happened before seem very minor by comparison."

"I'm glad," he said. "I guess it's just one of the dangers of Legilimency. Now I feel like I understand a little better what Professor Sprout was talking about a few weeks ago, when she mentioned that there could be privacy issues with Fawkes and Flora sending stuff back and forth. Of course, they're not going to send anything that might be hurtful to one of us, but just the idea that problems can happen when you don't have the normal privacy that people have."

"To tell you the truth, I had wondered if something like this might happen. One of the Legilimency books I read said that it's not at all uncommon for relationships to break down in the face of that kind of intimacy, whether they're romantic, friendship, or blood relationships. I like to think ours is stronger than most, but we can't be overconfident. Interestingly, I think part of what helps us is what you've been doing with Snape. You already got accustomed to a loss of your privacy, with the stress that goes with that. Making that mental adjustment is part of what's hard about this."

"You managed it pretty well, though," he pointed out.

She nodded her thanks. "Not that people can't, just that it's not easy. So, should we get back to it? I've done enough, you should practice now."

He agreed, and they started again. This time, he focused on trying to get into her mind through Occlumency barriers. They practiced for twenty minutes, then took a break, intending to go for ten more minutes before stopping. As they were about to start again, Harry's pendant blinked pink. Exchanging a look of mild surprise with Hermione, he answered it. "Pansy?"

"Hi, Harry. Can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Sure, I'm in my office with Hermione. Did you need to talk to me alone, or—"

"No, that's fine. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Harry's pendant stopped blinking. "That's interesting. I don't think she's ever called to ask to talk to me like that. I wonder what's up."

Hermione clearly had no idea. "Well, we'll find out in a few minutes. I guess we may as well stop now, then."

He nodded. "I don't know what made me think of this, but I wondered; are you worried that the time you spend teaching will affect your chances of getting ten Outstanding N.E.W.T.s?"

"It occurred to me, of course, and Professor McGonagall mentioned it to me the day before I started teaching, when we met to discuss the classes I'd be taking over. I'm not thrilled, obviously, but that's just the way it is. Even if they didn't need me for this, which they do, I'd do it anyway; it is good practice for next year. And... I'm sure you never thought you'd hear me say this, but now that I know what I'm going to be doing, it's less than crucial that I get all Outstandings. I still want it, of course, and I'll work as hard as I can to get it. But teaching has to come first."

"I guess that makes sense," he said. They were silent for a minute; Harry found himself wondering how it happened that a person, especially from such a young age, was motivated enough to spend so much time studying. He could barely be bothered to study enough to get acceptable marks, and he knew that there were far more students like him than like Hermione.

His train of thought was interrupted by a knock on the door. He and Hermione stood as he opened the door with his wand. Pansy walked in, followed by Thomas Dalton, the Slytherin sixth-year prefect. "Hi," said Thomas to Harry and Hermione.

They both greeted him, then Harry asked Pansy, "What's up?"

"There's a kind of a... situation," she started, looking uncertain as to exactly how to say what she wanted to say. "Thomas found out about it, and he came to me, but I'm not sure what to do either, so I wanted to talk to you. Both of you, I'm glad that you're here," she added to Hermione. "Not because you're teachers, of course, just because... well, I'll tell you after you hear what happened. First of all, I want you to promise not to repeat what we're going to tell you to anyone. Can you do that?" Harry nodded promptly; Hermione thought for a second or two, then did so as well. "Thomas, could you tell them what you told me?"

Thomas looked as though he wasn't happy about it, but spoke anyway. "I was looking for Blaise, I wanted to tell him something. This was about an hour ago, by the way. I figured he must be in his dormitory, so I thought I'd check there. I walked in and..." He took a deep breath, obviously uncomfortable. "Someone else was in there, they were... doing stuff. Robes off, underwear down, hands places... I'd rather not get a whole lot more specific, you get the idea."

Harry did, of course, but couldn't understand why Thomas appeared so bothered at a violation of the rules. "Well, it doesn't seem all that different from what goes on at the couples' places," he pointed out. "Why didn't they just go there? Or were they going to do more than that before they got caught?"

"There's one detail that Thomas hadn't gotten around to mentioning yet," explained Pansy. "The other person was a boy."

Harry and Hermione exchanged startled looks. "I don't know who it was," continued Thomas. "They were on a bed, and my coming in startled both of them. The other one seemed to be trying to hide, and he fell off the other side of the bed;

I never saw his face. I saw enough," he added, with a look of disgust, "to know that he was an older student, probably a fifth or sixth year. I'd hate to think it was one of my dormitory-mates. To be honest, I'm just as happy not knowing. I'd have been even happier not to have walked in at all. I really didn't want to see that."

"I can really understand that," agreed Harry. "Oh, my God..." His first thought was to recall that Blaise had asked him for a hug, and he couldn't help wondering whether Blaise asked him for reasons other than what Harry had assumed. He felt thoroughly uncomfortable, at both that particular thought and the whole situation in general.

"Well, the fact that they're both boys really isn't relevant from the standpoint of the rules being broken," said Hermione reasonably. "Thomas, what would you have done if it had been a girl he was with?"

Thomas and Pansy looked surprised at Hermione's cavalier attitude, and Harry was as well. "I would have left in a hurry, like I did this time. Then I would have found Blaise later and talked to him, told him to be sure never to do it again, maybe made sure he knew about the couples' places. But I sure as hell don't want to talk to him about this."

Harry could understand that, too. "Just out of curiosity, Thomas, why didn't you report him?"

Thomas shrugged. "I thought about it, before I talked to Pansy. He'd be expelled, just like that; I know Snape doesn't like him, he usually treated him worse than other Slytherins. And I know that as a prefect, I'm supposed to... but I know, well enough, anyway, what he went through from the other four, for six years. Snape let it happen, the school let it happen. I think the school owes him a break or two. I just

would really rather not have anything to do with it. I mean... I know it's illegal, Harry, but if you offered to do a Memory Charm on me, I wouldn't say no."

"Sorry," he said, empathizing with Thomas once again. "But I see what you mean about not reporting him, I wouldn't disagree. This is his last chance to have a decent year, I don't want to see him expelled. But why in the world would he do that?"

"People experiment, Harry," said Hermione, as if surprised he would ask the question. To his raised eyebrows, she rolled her eyes and added, "Okay, you didn't and I didn't, but some people do, when they're teenagers. It doesn't mean they're gay, maybe they were just curious. It could be anything, we have no idea."

Again, the other three seemed surprised at how casual she was about it. "I actually meant, why would he do it when he could be caught so easily," said Harry.

"Oh. That, I don't know," she admitted.

"I think I know," said Thomas. "He's been the only one in that dormitory since April. Probably no one but him's ever gone in there, I'd never done it before. It must be that he got so used to the idea that he just assumed that no one would ever go in there."

"So, what do you two think should be done?" asked Pansy.

"First of all, we should tell no one," said Harry firmly.

"But we have to tell McGonagall, don't we?" asked Hermione. "I mean, we are teachers, and you're a Head of House."

Harry shook his head. "Pansy and Thomas didn't come to us to report what happened to a teacher and Head of House. They came to us to get advice from friends. McGonagall might not expel him, but she would feel obligated to tell Snape, as Head of Slytherin House. Snape would want to expel Blaise; even if McGonagall wouldn't let him, what he would then do is start spreading it around, making sure the whole school knew. Remember what he did to Professor Lupin four years ago. That would be the same as expelling Blaise; his life would be so miserable that he'd have to leave. Not to mention, it would mark him for the rest of his life. The wizarding community is a small one; it could even get put on those new internet pages. Also, Thomas and Pansy came to us in confidence. If they'd wanted McGonagall to know, they'd have told her."

Pansy nodded. "It's not as though either of us is a friend of Blaise's or anything. But I agree with Thomas, he's suffered enough. He made a mistake, but he deserves another chance. So, what do we do about him? Not say anything, and hope he knows not to do it again?"

Harry received an image from Fawkes, sent by Hermione, of Harry and Snape sitting in Snape's office. The meaning was clear: she was pointing out that Snape would probably find out anyway, through viewing Harry's memories. He sent back the image, letting her know with an emotional impression that she shouldn't worry about it.

"Someone should talk to him," said Hermione, "and Harry, I know you won't want to, but you're the best person to do it. Thomas already said he doesn't want to, I have no relationship with him, and Pansy... doesn't either." Harry knew that her pause indicated that Pansy was probably the least well suited of the three to talk to Blaise. "You've at

least talked to him, he seems to have a certain respect for you. I think he'll listen to you."

"What would I say?" asked Harry, feeling at a loss. "Stop fooling around with boys?"

Hermione sighed impatiently. "Harry, the fact that it was a boy has nothing to do with it. There's not supposed to be any intimate physical contact anywhere in the school; the couples' places are a well-known and understood exception to that. Just be nice, explain that you're not going to tell anyone, you just wanted to make sure he understood that he's not supposed to do that, and tell him about the couples' places. Who knows, he might not even know about them."

"Hermione," said a surprised Pansy, "It's, uh, nice that you're so open-minded about this kind of thing, but there's no way that two boys are going to go to the couples' places. Even if they went separately, there's way too much risk of being caught. They wouldn't be seen inside the place, but everyone knows who the couples are. If people see someone new going into or coming out of one, they'll wait to see the other one leave, out of curiosity. If Harry suggested that, and Blaise did it, he'd be found out very soon."

"Yes, you're right, I hadn't thought of that," admitted Hermione. "Well, Harry, just talk to him and make sure he knows not to do it. But please, don't make an issue out of the fact that it was another boy."

"Why not?" asked Harry incredulously. "How can you act like that doesn't matter? I mean, it's so..." He couldn't think of a word, but made a bodily gesture to indicate revulsion. Glancing at Thomas and Pansy, he could see that they agreed with him, especially Thomas.

"Harry," she said earnestly, "What if it had turned out that I liked girls? Would you have not wanted to be my friend anymore, because of that?"

"But you wouldn't have decided to—"

"People don't decide that," she said, her tone adding emphasis. "The Muggle world is discovering this, a lot faster than we are. I read a lot, Harry. Trust me when I say that some people are just this way naturally, they can't control who they're attracted to. Now, answer my question: if I liked girls..." She waited expectantly, eyebrows raised.

"No, of course I wouldn't not be your friend," he acknowledged. Nodding, she looked at Pansy, asking the same question without speaking.

Pansy looked discomfited. "Well, it would be weird, but yes, I agree with Harry. I think you know that, and that's why you asked." An unfamiliar thought flashed through Harry's head, and he quickly realized that he had unconsciously used Legilimency on Pansy. He felt her feeling of revulsion at the thought of Hermione being attracted to women, and Pansy's understanding that she would never have become friends with Hermione had she even suspected such a thing. He understood that Pansy had lied partly because she didn't want to hurt Hermione's feelings, and partly because it could provoke an argument with Hermione that Pansy didn't want to deal with. Harry found he didn't blame Pansy for lying, and hoped that Hermione didn't get the same information he did.

Seeming not to have, Hermione nodded. "I certainly hope so, anyway. People usually start thinking differently, getting past the initial reaction, when it's a close friend or family member. They put more effort into understanding it. But for

now, I'll just say one other thing: even if they could choose, there's nothing wrong with it, because it doesn't hurt anyone. Yes, it's... yucky, and my gut reaction about two women would be the same. But nobody's making us do anything we don't want to do. If they're not hurting anyone, they should be left alone to do what they want. If you ask Albus- well, if you could ask Albus," she quickly amended, because of Thomas's presence, "he would say the same thing."

Harry was having a hard time grasping this, as he had always simply assumed that it was wrong, and that was all there was to it. Thinking about it, he realized that this idea had mainly been passed to him by the Dursleys; he had agreed with it because of his visceral reaction to it. But he couldn't dismiss or argue with what Hermione had said, and she had a particular impact when she mentioned Dumbledore. Harry resolved to ask him that night.

"Well, they shouldn't do it in places they could be walked in on," pointed out Thomas.

"Yes, of course," agreed Hermione, "but that goes for normal couples too. You just would have reacted differently if it had been a girl with him."

"Yeah, I'd have said, 'good for him,'" said Thomas. "But this... sorry, Hermione, this is just too strange."

"I understand, it just takes time to get past that kind of reaction. Thanks for letting us know, Thomas. We can't give you a Memory Charm, but you don't have to think about it anymore."

Thomas nodded, understanding that he'd been dismissed. "I should get on back to the library," said Pansy. "You can help

Harry with what he's going to say." She and Thomas left, and Harry and Hermione were alone again.

"How can you be sure that Snape won't do anything, if he finds out by viewing your memories?" she asked. "It's his House, he'll be furious at you, at all of us, for not telling him."

"Maybe, but he knows he can't use this information," argued Harry. "I asked him about this when he used the information he got from me to decide to kill Skeeter. He said he accepted the idea as a general principle, but that circumstances could cause exceptions to be necessary. This is definitely not like that, nothing important is at stake. He won't like it, but he won't do anything."

Her face reflected her doubt. "I hope you're right. Now, would you like some advice on what you should say to Blaise?" He just nodded, feeling that to say yes would be an understatement.

Two hours later, Hermione entered his office and sat down. "So, how did it go?"

"As well as could be expected," he replied. "He was pretty scared. He thought that I wanted to talk to him as a professor; it took me a few minutes to convince him that it was unofficial, that I was just a student. I told him that he needed to be more careful, that other people can walk into the dormitories."

"Did he say anything?"

"Surprisingly, yes, a lot, for him. He insisted, in kind of a panicked way, that it was the other boy who had 'started it,' as he put it. I told Blaise that I didn't know who the other boy was and didn't want to know, and he managed not to

tell me. He just said—I should say that there was a point when he seemed to be trying to explain what had happened, not that I asked him. He kept pausing, saying a few disjointed words, interrupting himself, it was almost amazing I understood anything he said at all. What he seemed to be trying to get across was it was the other boy who initiated everything. Which I can believe, given Blaise's personality; I can't see him doing something like that. Basically, he said that the other boy started touching him, and it felt good, and one thing led to another. At one point, he said, 'I'm not like that,' as if it was important that I believe him. Also, he said, 'no one's ever...' He didn't finish that sentence either, but even I figured out what that meant."

She nodded sympathetically. "He'd never had any sexual contact at all, so it was easy for him to go along with what was happening."

"Yeah, but I hadn't had any until late last year, and I wouldn't have gone along with someone trying to do that."

"No, most people wouldn't," she agreed. "I think what's happened to him at Hogwarts comes into this somewhere. I mean, I don't know—no one can know except him, and maybe not even him—but he probably had an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Whatever abuse Malfoy and the others dished out over the years was something he couldn't control; he was at their mercy, at the mercy of his situation. He probably got used to the idea that he had no control, over anything. Things just happened. So, maybe it caused him to be very slow to say 'no' to anything in general, to assert himself."

He shrugged. "I don't know much about psychology, but what you say sounds like it makes sense. It sounds like you mean he had weak sales resistance."

"Yes, I don't think they have that phrase in the wizarding world, but that's close to what I mean. I'm a little surprised you're familiar with the phrase."

"My uncle Vernon liked to say it about Petunia. He would say very approvingly that she had excellent sales resistance."

"Not only sales," muttered Hermione. Harry assumed she was referring to Petunia's reluctance to help him a month ago.

"Do you think I did the right thing?" he asked. "I mean, telling Blaise not to tell me who it was. What if he approaches some other student the same way, maybe somebody younger..."

She shook her head. "That's really unlikely. This only happened because Blaise has a dormitory to himself, which will never happen again. There's just no opportunity for that sort of thing to happen. If we're going to worry about what happens in dormitories, I'd rather worry about the kind of thing that happened to Blaise for six years."

"Yes," he agreed. "I've wondered about that, how that was allowed to happen. I don't wonder why Snape let it happen, he has this 'the strongest will survive' attitude. I do wonder why Albus let it happen. I mean, four sons of Death Eaters in one dormitory with someone like Blaise, it wouldn't take a genius to figure out what would happen. Why didn't he do something about it?"

"I'm not sure what he really could do," said Hermione. "It's hard to regulate what goes on behind the doors of a dormitory. There are magical monitoring devices which are the equivalent of Muggle cameras, but then you start getting into privacy issues, and you know how Albus would have been about that."

"Yes, I know. But you'd think there was something he could do... warn Malfoy, something like that." Harry knew he was grasping at straws, but he hated to think that the kind of abuse that Blaise had suffered couldn't be prevented.

"He might have, for all we know," said Hermione. "But the other thing you have to keep in mind is that the Head of House is ultimately in charge of what goes on in any House. Albus might not have wanted to step on Snape's toes, so to speak, especially if there was little or nothing that could be done anyway. We know Snape didn't care, but even if he had... Well, you're a Head of House. If you thought four students in a dormitory were bullying and abusing the other one, what would you do?"

Harry thought about it for a minute. "I'd keep an eye on them, and ask the other teachers to do so also. One of the things we talk about in the staff room is what seems to be happening among the students. Between classes and seeing students in the corridors and in the Great Hall, the teachers have a pretty good idea of what goes on. If I thought there was bullying, I'd talk to the ones I thought were doing it, and ask them. I'd know if they were lying, of course, and—"

"But not every teacher can do Legilimency," pointed out Hermione.

"Yes, but you asked what I would do. Anyway, if they lied, I'd tell them I knew they were lying, that bullying was unacceptable, and I'd warn them that if it continued, they would end up being expelled. And I'd do it, too. Not immediately, I'd give them a few chances, a few owls to the parents. But eventually, if it didn't stop, I'd expel them."

She looked at him sympathetically. "I suppose you're thinking about when you used to get bullied by Dudley."

He nodded. "That stopped after I came to Hogwarts, of course, he was too afraid to do it then. But before then, there were plenty of times when I'd run for my cupboard, happy that it was so small that he couldn't get in there. So, yeah, you could say I'd be pretty strict about that."

"Is that something you think about much? Do you try to work out whether that's happening or not?"

"I don't know how conscious it is," he replied, "but I'm pretty sure that if there was any sign of it, I would've noticed. I don't see it much over the whole school, really. Based on last year, I might have wondered about a few of the Slytherin fourth and fifth years, but I don't see any signs this year. I wonder if it has to do with people trying to study the energy of love."

"It wouldn't surprise me," she agreed. "I've also noticed that things seem to be calmer than usual. I wonder partly if that's because Malfoy's gone, and so is his influence. Not that there are no bullies anymore, but they can't be so open about it."

Near the end of Hermione's sentence, Harry felt his hand tingle. Just as Hermione finished speaking, he heard Ginny say, "I'd like to talk to you when you're finished, no hurry." He relayed the message to Hermione, who got up. "I think we were almost finished anyway, tell her to go ahead." Harry gave Ginny the message and put down his hand. "I think you did fine with Blaise," Hermione assured him. "It wasn't easy, I would have been uncomfortable too. See you later."

Ginny walked in a minute after Hermione left, and gave Harry an enthusiastic hug and kiss. She sat down next to him and held his hand as she spoke. "It's strange... the way the privacy situation is, every moment alone with you is

precious, but after we've both graduated, it won't be. I wonder if we'll take it for granted after a while."

"At some point, I imagine we would," he said. Sensing that his answer seemed to have disappointed her, he added, "Not that it still wouldn't be important, of course. Just that, for example, if we couldn't eat for a few days we'd be starved, but it wouldn't mean that we... okay, maybe that's a bad example. But you know what I mean."

"You're not making me feel any better," she said teasingly. "I know you're right, of course. At some point you and I will be in the house doing different things, alone but not thinking about the other one especially, like Mum and Dad do now. But I still want us to be obnoxiously affectionate, even if it annoys the children."

"We could tell them it's important to the energy of love," he joked. "They'd believe me, since I'm the one that discovered it."

"Assuming we both make it that far."

He raised his eyebrows; it wasn't like her to be so pessimistic. "Are you thinking about the thing with the wasps?"

She shrugged dispiritedly. "Not just that, but the ones before, and the ones to come. I know, I shouldn't say that. That night," and he understood that she meant the night he told her he was in love with her, "I said we had to not think about the dangers, just dive into it. I was right, it's just hard to do all the time. Sometimes I feel like when we talk about the future, about children, we're just tempting fate."

He leaned over and put an arm around her shoulders, squeezing tightly. "I think we'll make it," he said

reassuringly. "Somehow I just think we will."

She leaned against him. "I know, I'm sure you're right. Most of the time, anyway." After a minute of silence, she leaned over and kissed him. "I love you."

"I love you," he said.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be like this. There's all these burdens on you, and sometimes I feel like I just add one more."

He shook his head vigorously, and ran a hand through her hair. "You're what makes all the burdens bearable. The others too, of course, but especially you."

She smiled at him, conveying her thanks. After another minute, she asked, "How did the Legilimency go?"

He chuckled mirthlessly. "Funny you should ask that. She ran across a passing thought I had during a memory she was viewing, last year when she gave us the maps. I'd forgotten I'd thought this, but when Pansy asked Hermione why she'd never fallen in love with me, I thought that maybe I hadn't thought of her that way because of how bossy and controlling she was."

Ginny winced. "Oh, poor Hermione. I mean, the problem is, of course, that it's not as though what you thought was unreasonable."

"She said that too. But, still..."

She nodded. "It had to have really hurt. I bet she broke down." He nodded, grimacing. She took his hand. "Funny, I feel sorry for you. More for her, of course, but it's you I'm with right now. It must have made you feel really bad to feel responsible for hurting her like that, even though you really

didn't do anything wrong." She looked at him in a way that suggested she was about to say something she didn't want to say. "You know, sometimes I really envy Hermione. She has this connection with you that I can't have. You can communicate through the phoenixes, know through them what the other one is feeling. You do Legilimency, which lets you get really close, like you know each other's minds. Sometimes I... resent it a little, I feel bad that I can't have that with you. I feel as though the advice Albus gave you, not to do Legilimency with me, wasn't worth the loss of what I could have with you. But then something like this happens, and it reminds me again why he said that. I'm not sure I could deal with it if you had that kind of thought about me, and I found out about it."

"I would never—"

"I know," she interrupted him, squeezing his hand. "We haven't really had a big fight yet. But we will get into fights, no couple never fights. I'd hate to accidentally run across what you were thinking during a fight."

"Maybe the energy of love will stop us from getting into fights," he half-joked.

She chuckled. "That would be nice, but I'm not holding my breath. So, are you and Hermione okay now?"

He nodded solemnly. "Fortunately, she doesn't hold it against me. She kept saying I was right, which only made it worse. I think what made her feel better finally was, ironically... there was a lot of emotion in the situation, and I focused on how much I loved her, and sent her that through the phoenixes. That made her, both of us, I guess, feel better."

"I can imagine," responded Ginny with mild sarcasm. At Harry's surprised look, she said, "Come on, Harry, I just got through telling you that I envied her that. What you did with her is exactly, exactly what I wish you could do with me. You didn't necessarily have to tell me that, you could have just said you patched it up and everything was fine."

He looked at her intently, puzzled. "Are you saying you don't want me to tell you things?"

She sighed. "No, it's just the timing. There are certain times when it may be better not to say certain things."

"But how am I supposed to know which times those are? And also, if I start not saying things because I'm worried that it'll upset you, then I'm afraid I may end up not saying things I should be saying. Does that make any sense?"

"I don't know," she said, frustrated. "Maybe you should just go ahead and say them, I'll get upset sometimes, and you can learn that way."

"Look, that's not fair, you know I don't want to upset you. But it's like you're asking me to read your mind or something—"

"It's not reading my mind, it's just understanding the situation, understanding how I'm feeling. Remember, Albus said that we have to be able to see through each other's eyes, more or less, to be able to—"

She stopped talking as Harry's pendant made a sharp noise, the one he had been taught meant that Bright had touched his ring, signaling that he was under attack. The particular tone meant that he was in his living room.

Harry had discussed with his friends what would be done in this situation; they had made it clear they wanted to be with him, as quickly as possible. Phoenixes would take them, but he would escort one person in his presence and close enough to him that he would lose no time in taking them. Ginny leaped out of her chair as Harry stood; they drew their wands and put their left arms on each other's shoulders.

Instantly, they were in Bright's living room. Bright and his wife were sitting on their sofa, and Killing Curses were headed for both of them; the one aimed at Bright clearly had been issued first, a half-second ahead of the other. Again acting as had already been discussed, Harry put up a shield around Bright while Ginny did so for his wife. Harry turned toward the source of the Curses, and saw Voldemort for a tenth of a second. As Harry whirled to face him, however, Voldemort disappeared with a popping sound. Harry managed not to vocalize his frustration that he had not only not caught Voldemort, but had not had a decent look at him to try to work out where he kept the device which allowed him to disappear when unconscious.

As Bright and his wife started to recover from their shock, Ron and Pansy arrived with Fawkes, and a second later, Neville and Hermione arrived holding Flora's tail as two Aurors burst into the room. "Where are they?" asked one of the Aurors.

"He's gone, it was just Voldemort," said Harry, to the Aurors and his friends. After another few seconds, six more Aurors came through the front door, including Kingsley; Harry knew that these had been the ready-status Aurors. One of the first two to arrive spoke into her pendant, giving the all-clear signal.

"It was only Voldemort, he Disapparated out," reported Harry to Kingsley. "Two Killing Curses, one for each. Ginny happened to be with me; another half a second would have been too late. He Disapparated before I had a chance to do anything."

Kingsley nodded his acknowledgment. "Minister, Mrs. Bright, are you all right?"

"I daresay I will be, once my heart returns to its normal rate," said a shaken Bright. His wife just nodded. "He just Apparated in, as if he knew somehow exactly where we were in the house. Granted, the living room is a good guess, but... I just touched the ring reflexively. He sent the Curses at us very quickly, perhaps a second after he arrived."

Kingsley looked at Harry. "You six, go to the meeting room near the detection area. I'll be along shortly."

Harry turned to head for the fireplace, but Bright spoke before he moved. Looking as though he wasn't quite sure what to say, he paused for a second, then said, "Harry, Ginny... thank you very much."

"No problem," said Harry, as Ginny nodded. He walked to the fireplace, exiting after Ron and Pansy.

They had just sat down in the meeting room when Kingsley entered, followed by McGonagall, who Harry assumed had been taken there by Flora. Kingsley sat at one end of the table; McGonagall, the other. "First of all," said Kingsley, looking at Harry and Ginny, "and needless to say, but... well done."

"Thanks," they said, in unison. "The fact that he left so quickly kind of surprised me," added Harry. "Was that

because I showed up, or do you think he was he planning to do that anyway?"

"It's a good question," said Kingsley. "We kept it a closely held secret that you would be guarding him, so Voldemort may not have known. He might have suspected, of course, and done what he did partly to see whether it would get you there or not. But I see what you mean; that was the first time we've seen him run away from a fight before it even started. I doubt he would have run away if not for your showing up."

"I agree," said McGonagall. "I assume this means that Harry will have to create an anti-Apparation plot around the Minister's home."

"It looks that way," agreed Kingsley. "We had thought the one that was there might keep Voldemort out, but apparently not."

"I also wonder why he didn't try at night," said Harry. "When we started this, we talked about the fact that it would be the best time for him to try, since being asleep would slow me down by at least a second or two."

"We'll be wondering about that as well," said Kingsley. "We have to wonder whether this was a totally serious attempt, or an attempt at intimidation."

"I'll bet it seemed serious to Bright," put in Ron. "From what Harry said after we got here, he was a split second away from being dead."

"That's part of why I said 'totally' serious," said Kingsley. "Clearly he would have killed him if Harry hadn't shown up, but the point is that he probably could have done it in a way with a better chance of success. Unfortunately, we can't

really know his motives, just take what may be poor guesses."

"So, if I put down a new plot, then the only way Voldemort can get to him at home is to overpower the Aurors."

"Yes," nodded Kingsley, "and that would give you plenty of time to get to Bright before he did, so it's rather unlikely he'll try that. No, after the new plot, I suspect that the Minister will be quite safe, at least from direct attack. We still have to worry about other things, like remote-control methods such as the wasps that almost got you, that kind of thing. Of course, that's not really your department."

"So, from now on," clarified Hermione, "he'll have to take Fawkes if he gets that signal."

"From the Minister's home, yes," said Kingsley. "He can still Apparate to the Minister's office, where of course an attempt is much less likely."

They talked for another ten minutes, and it was decided that Harry would put down the plot the next day at five o'clock, after his last class. McGonagall and the six decided to return to Hogwarts via the Owl Office fireplace, rather than use the phoenixes. When asked "What about safety?" by Ron, McGonagall's deadpan reply was, "Oh, with the six of you around, I feel quite safe." Ron nodded, acknowledging her point that any attack other than a major ambush was likely to fail against the seven of them.

* * * * *

Having been notified by McGonagall of what had happened, Snape summoned Harry to his office for a session twenty minutes after his return. Snape explained that he was planning to request a session later that evening anyway, so

it was fortuitous that he would have the opportunity to view what happened.

After having taken the usual time to get in the proper state of mind, Harry entered Snape's office and sat down. Snape started viewing, and put down his wand for a moment when he finished viewing both the incident and its aftermath. "Do you have any opinion," asked Harry, "on whether it was 'totally' serious, like Kingsley mentioned?"

"Any opinion of mine would be no less speculation than yours or Mr. Shacklebolt's," said Snape. "Though I believe he feels there are more likely to be active guards at night, when the need for them is more clear. He did take something of a chance by simply doing what he did. I would speculate that he was confirming that you would come, and testing your reaction time."

When no further comment was forthcoming from Harry, Snape resumed viewing Harry's memories. He started with that day, viewing Harry's Legilimency session and the emotional difficulties it caused. Then Pansy's interruption, and her and Thomas's entry and relating of what had happened with Blaise. Harry saw Snape's eyes widen and a scowl form, but he was silent and continued viewing. He then viewed Harry's conversation with Blaise, and put down his wand when it was finished.

Harry looked up to see Snape looking at him with considerable and undisguised anger; Harry was surprised, since Snape normally repressed such reactions even when the fact that he was having them was clear. "I shall leave for the headmistress the lecture about a teacher, a Head of House no less, who so flagrantly disregards the rules. I will, however, promptly expel Mr. Zabini, though not until he

informs me of the identity of the other... perverted individual involved in this disgusting affair."

"You can't do that!" Harry almost shouted.

Now Snape did shout. "Do not presume to tell me what I can and cannot do!" Harry quickly reached for his wand and soundproofed the room. "Expelling both is what I absolutely should do, for the protection of the other students!"

"You don't give a damn about the protection of other students!" Harry shouted back. "If you did, you would never have let what happened to Blaise happen for six years!"

"And how do you suggest I should have prevented it?" asked Snape smugly. "If I had known he was a pervert, I could have informed the other Slytherins, who no doubt would have left him alone out of disgust."

"Yes, I'm sure they would have," said Harry sarcastically. "But you know very well you can't tell anyone, you can't use this information. You only got it from viewing my memories, you wouldn't have known otherwise. You just can't use any information you get from this."

"I have used such information before--"

"Yes, you gave me a Memory Charm and sent me to the restaurant so you could pretend to be me and kill Skeeter," interrupted Harry, his voice raised again. "I know that she knew too much and was dangerous, but it was still McGonagall's decision. But this is nothing like that, and you know it. It isn't important to the Order, nothing is at stake from two boys touching each other in an empty dormitory. You wouldn't be this worked up if one of them had done the Cruciatus Curse on the other! It's only because you hate homosexuals--"

"Why are you arguing with me?" thundered Snape, who Harry feared was on the verge of losing his equilibrium. "It disgusts you! I could feel it in your memory! You find what they did disgusting, as well you should! You should be pleased that they'll be expelled!"

"I tried to do," said Harry, trying to calm himself, "what I thought Albus would have done. You know perfectly well that he wouldn't have expelled them. If I'd wanted them expelled, I would've gone to you myself. And yes, I do find it kind of revolting, but they didn't hurt anyone."

"Yes, they did; they hurt each other," snarled Snape. "If they are told that such behavior is acceptable, they will continue it, and it will harm all of society in the long run. There is a reason why such activity is viewed with disgust by wizarding society. Or perhaps you would like to see this occur in all dormitories, of all Houses?"

"I'd rather it was that than bullying," responded Harry. "Anyway, you can't expel them. You have to act as you would if you knew nothing about this."

"They will be expelled!" shouted Snape. "I will not have perverts in my House!"

"You can't expel them!" said Harry, raising his voice again despite his attempts not to. "You should never have known about this in the first place. The reason we do this, in case you've forgotten, is to keep you viable as a spy against Voldemort. That's the important part of all this. What happened today just isn't important, not in the big scheme of things. You would recognize that if you weren't so emotional about it."

Snape gazed at Harry coldly. "They will be expelled," he repeated.

Harry gave Snape an equally cold look in response. "You need McGonagall's permission to do that, and I'm going to make sure you don't get it. So if you want to expel Blaise, you'd better do it in the next five minutes. If you'd like to come with me to McGonagall's office to make your case, fine. But I'm going."

He waited for a second to see if Snape would follow or not. Finally, his face a mask of barely controlled rage, Snape stood. They walked out the door, into the Potions dungeon, and to McGonagall's office.

Once there, Snape spoke first, giving what Harry knew to be a highly distorted and selective view of what had happened. Harry managed to interrupt only twice, though he knew he would get his turn. Finally, he did, and told his story, McGonagall listening silently.

"Professor Snape," she said firmly, "I can very much understand why you wish to see them expelled, though I feel that expulsion is a rather harsh penalty for such a first offense—"

"We have no idea how many offenses may have occurred!" shouted Snape. "I must conduct an interrogation—"

"Professor Snape!" McGonagall stood and glared at him. "You indeed have quite an emotional view of this, if you have forgotten my well-known aversion to being interrupted." Snape remained silent, though clearly furious. "I mean that it is a first offense for our purposes. You may recall that last year when Malfoy was being disciplined for the Quidditch incident, only established prior offenses were considered, even though we all understood he had committed many more. You did not object at that time.

"As I was saying, while I understand your wish to see them expelled, unfortunately, Professor Potter is correct. Information you receive from your arrangement with him must be considered confidential. It has no connection to the functioning of the school per se, but since I know about the situation, I must abide by these guidelines as well."

She leaned over and stared at Snape, clearly trying to impress on him how serious she was. "You will tell no one of this, Professor. You will question no one, and you will act as you would have had you not known this." She resumed her seat, looking at Snape appraisingly; Harry wondered if she was trying to decide whether Snape would follow her instructions.

Snape was still furious, but trying to control himself. "And what is to stop Zabini from turning the seventh year boys' dormitory into a den of perversion?"

Harry cut in before McGonagall could answer. "Oh, come on, you saw my talk with him. The whole thing wasn't his idea, and he was scared to death by being caught. There's no way he's going to do it again."

"And supposing he decides he liked it?" Snape challenged him. "He was engaged in quite willful activity when he was walked in on."

"I will place a monitoring device in the dormitory," decided McGonagall, to Harry's dismay. "It will record images only if anyone other than Mr. Zabini enters the dormitory, or if there is any magical activity. That should allay your concerns about any repetition of this incident."

Snape looked as though he felt it was barely adequate, but it was too much for Harry. "We can't just trust him not to do

it again? I mean, Albus wouldn't have done this, violated his privacy like this—"

"You just heard me say, Professor, that the device will only record if something unauthorized is happening. After what he did, he has forfeited any reasonable expectation of privacy; I think this is more than fair." Harry didn't think so, but held his tongue. "Professor Snape, you may go. I have a few more things to say to Professor Potter."

Snape headed out, then paused at the door. "When you are finished, Professor Potter, I would like to finish the session we started." After what had happened, Harry was surprised that Snape would want to, as he was clearly still very angry. Harry just nodded, and Snape left.

McGonagall regarded Harry solemnly. "I would like to know, Harry, why you did not tell me of this."

"Pansy and Thomas came to me in confidence," he said. "They didn't come to me because I'm a teacher, or a Head of House. They did it because they wanted advice from a friend, and they thought that since I had... well, not a relationship with Blaise, but as much of one as anyone does, that I could help."

"They may have come to you as a friend, but you cannot separate your roles as student, friend, teacher and Head of House so easily," she said. "You do have a responsibility to the school, to the welfare of the students. I admit I am concerned that this other student may attempt to do the same thing with a younger boy. I know, there will not be a similar opportunity, but I would still feel better at least knowing who it was. Failing to even allow Mr. Zabini to tell you the name was not in the best interest of Hogwarts."

"I would have let him tell me, maybe even asked him, but I didn't want Professor Snape to know. It's bad enough that he knows about Blaise, and I was mainly thinking about what he did to Remus at the end of the third year. Albus instructed him not to tell anyone about Remus, but he just disobeyed it, because he was angry. He's angry here, too. I don't have a lot of confidence that he's going to follow the instructions you just gave him."

"That is my worry, not yours," she informed him. "While I am not as... emotionally invested as Professor Snape in this kind of matter, I have enough difficulty in tacitly approving of encounters which take place in the couples' places. I am particularly disturbed at the idea of this kind of thing happening between students of the same gender."

"Albus wouldn't have cared-" he started to point out, but was quickly interrupted.

McGonagall stood, eyes ablaze. "I am *not* Albus!" Her voice was raised only a little above normal, but her tone and eyes made her anger clear. She glared at him for a few seconds, then seemed to recover herself, and sat back down. "That will be all, Professor," she said abruptly, looking at a document on her desk. Harry hesitated, understanding that he had made her very angry, but not completely understanding how he had done it. After a few uncomfortable seconds, he turned and left.

Walking away from her office, he wanted to talk to all of his friends, but knew he should only talk to Hermione and Ginny, since a lot of what had happened had to do with Snape, and their arrangement. But he couldn't talk to them at the moment, because Snape had asked that their session resume. Am I in any emotional condition to do that? wondered Harry. He approached Snape's office, then stopped

for a minute to try to summon a loving state of mind. It was very difficult, considering what had just happened, both with McGonagall and Snape. He tried, and did his best.

He entered Snape's office, and sat down. Without a word, Snape pointed his wand at Harry, and images started to flash in his mind. He saw himself and Ginny, in his Hogwarts quarters, naked, on his bed...

Harry looked into Snape's eyes, and found what he saw very disturbing. Not only was Snape still very angry, but there was a gleam in his eyes, as though he was enjoying what he was doing, for all the wrong reasons. Making an impulsive decision, Harry grabbed his wand and shoved Snape out of his mind.

Snape looked at Harry in disbelief. "You're not going to do that," said Harry. He'd had almost no chance to think about it, and he knew it could have serious consequences, but he strongly felt that it was the right thing to do.

Snape glared at Harry, anger mounting again. "I can look at anything I want! This was explained to you—"

"Not this, not now," Harry interrupted him, adding to Snape's anger. "The only reason you're looking at this right now is because you want to embarrass me. You're angry with me, so you want me to feel embarrassed at that kind of thing being viewed, and enjoy the feeling. That's not what this is about, and I'm not going to let you do it."

"You must," insisted Snape. "You agreed to this, you agreed to allow anything to be viewed. There were no conditions, no stipulations."

"There's one that's implied, and that's what Muggles call 'good faith,'" replied Harry. "This is to help you cope with

everyday life. That's why I'm doing it, that's why you're doing it. It is not so you can enjoy my embarrassment. I don't think enjoying my embarrassment is helping you, but even if it was, it wouldn't be acceptable anyway. For me to do what I do, I have to have a certain amount of affection for you. Hard as that seemed at first, I have managed it. But your doing something like this jeopardizes that. You can't do something to me that I know is malicious."

"You talk about me being malicious," sneered Snape. "You know how I feel about perverts, and you go out of your way to protect them!"

Voice slightly raised, Harry cut in before Snape could continue. "Nothing I did was to deliberately hurt you, and you know that. You would never have even known about this if it wasn't for our arrangement, this had nothing to do with you. I have to do what I would normally do even if you couldn't see my memories. Not only in private with Ginny, but in situations like this, or even when talking about you to Ginny or Hermione. You know that, too. This is just because you're angry right now. I understand that, but what you're doing is destructive, and I won't allow it." Harry stood and took a step to the door, then paused before leaving. "The next time you call, I'll assume it's because you're ready to do this properly, the way it's supposed to be done." He could see nothing on Snape's face but anger, but figured that it wasn't surprising. He opened the door and left.

Mentally exhausted, he headed for his own office. He held up his hand, and asked Ginny to find Hermione and for them both to meet him there. She said she would, and he was only waiting a few minutes in his office before they arrived. He conjured a third chair, and as they sat, he said, "Boy, I can't wait for this day to be over."

"I was hoping it wasn't quite over yet," said Ginny. Harry knew she was referring to their weekly visit to his quarters, which they usually did on Sunday evening.

"I hate to say it, but I'm not sure tonight's a good night for that," he said sadly. Ginny looked at him quizzically, and he told them about what had happened; both meetings with Snape, and the one with McGonagall in between. They shook their heads at least twice each throughout the story, and Ginny was angry by the time he finished.

"I can see why you're not keen on going to the quarters tonight, I wouldn't be either," she said, adding, "Bastard. It's bad enough that that kind of thing has the possibility of being viewed at all, but the idea that he'll do it maliciously is really something else. Like you said to him, that wasn't part of the deal. He really did abuse it. What is his problem with gays, anyway? I've never seen anyone get like that."

"Maybe he 'experimented' when he was younger, and hates himself now for having done it," said Hermione, half-seriously.

Harry chuckled humorlessly. "He views this memory and hears you say that, he'll go ballistic."

"I don't care," said Hermione defensively. "Okay, granted, I'm not the one that has to be around when that happens, but you know that we have to be able to say anything we would normally, as if he weren't listening. So, you're just going to wait for him to signal you again? Do you really think he'll behave appropriately next time?"

Harry shrugged. "He'd better, or I'm stopping it again. I really don't have any choice; I'm angry with him too, for doing that. I'm trying to be as understanding as I can about it, because I know his situation and how hard it is for him.

It's probably pretty hard for him to deal with it if he gets really angry. But I'm exactly the person he's not supposed to take it out on. I have to think that once he has some time to work this through, he'll realize it, and do what he's supposed to do next time. I hope so, anyway. Of course, I plan on asking Albus and the other Snape for advice tonight. I hope they tell me something useful."

"I have a feeling they will," said Hermione. "I must say, I knew Snape wouldn't be happy about the Blaise thing, but I never thought he'd react quite like that. He's really irrational, not only for the thing with you just now, but even trying to use the information he got from you when it wasn't that important. He should know better, he would if he weren't so emotional about it."

"And I managed to tick McGonagall off, too," said Harry, annoyed at himself. "I'd like to know how I did that." Taking in Hermione's incredulous expression, he sarcastically added, "Okay, and if you could tell me without making me feel like a total moron, that'd be even better." To her wounded look, he said, "Come on, you were looking at me like you couldn't believe I was so stupid. I've had a long day, and not really fun recently."

Hermione sighed, apparently trying especially hard to be tolerant. "Sorry, it just seems so obvious. You compared her to Albus, twice in the same conversation. That has to be a sensitive spot for her. You criticized her actions by saying that Albus wouldn't have done it that way. Considering how you feel about him, that's a lot like saying to her that she's doing poorly, because she made decisions he wouldn't have. It's hard for her, taking the position of someone who was legendary and as well-loved as he was. She's bound to compare herself to him, and feel she comes up short. And there you are, vocally confirming what she probably fears.

And this is coming from the person who she feels is going to be the next Dumbledore, so to speak, stronger than he was and even more well-loved than he was. She probably feels sometimes like she's a temporary and insignificant figure, a placeholder between two great headmasters, one past, one future. But she has to do what she feels is best, even if it's different from what Albus would have done. For her to react like that, what you said must've really hurt her."

Harry looked down, upset that he hadn't seen it. "Today seems to be my day for that. Both of you, then her. I wonder what Professor Trelawney would say about my astrological chart for today."

Hermione smiled a little. "Probably, that you're going to die."

Ginny looked at Hermione askance, but Harry burst out in laughter. "Yes, she probably would," he agreed, his laughter dying down. "What?" he asked Ginny, who was wearing a distinctly unhappy look.

Ginny didn't answer for a few seconds, then Hermione did. "I think—"

"Let him figure it out," snapped Ginny. "He needs the practice."

"Why?" asked Hermione defensively. "I'm the one you're upset with, not him."

"Ginny, I'm really not in the mood to be trying to figure things out," said Harry.

Ginny spoke immediately, to Hermione, giving no sign that she'd heard Harry. "You could always tell him through the damn phoenixes, anyway."

Hermione gaped at Ginny. "What?! What does that have to do with anything?"

Harry put his head in his hands, feeling as though he couldn't deal with anything more. He was about to look up when there was a knock on the door. Without asking Ginny or Hermione if they minded, he waved his wand and the door opened, and Pansy walked in. She looked wary as she took in everyone's expressions. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but... there's kind of a situation that you need to know about."

"I don't suppose it'd be a good situation, would it?" asked Harry wearily. "I think I've had enough of the other kind."

"No," said Pansy seriously, "it's a bad situation. I'm not sure just how bad, you'll know better than me. Helen just came to me to tell me this. One of the second years overheard you talking to Snape... well, arguing, apparently. They told the others what they heard, and now all ten of them know lots of stuff they shouldn't. Some of it is stuff even I didn't know."

Harry cringed. "Oh, this day just keeps getting better," he muttered. "All right, what do they know?"

"They know all about the Blaise thing, pretty much everything I told you, and they knew that Snape wanted to expel him and the other one and you argued with him. They know that Snape's a spy for the Order against Voldemort, and that he killed Skeeter." Harry exchanged alarmed looks with Ginny and Hermione. "But that's stuff I already knew," continued Pansy grimly. "Helen also said that whoever it was overheard that... Snape is viewing your memories, and something about it being important for him to be 'viable' as a spy against Voldemort. Which raises more questions than it answers, but never mind that. I assume this has to do with

what the three of you know about Snape that you can't talk about. I had a feeling this was bad."

Harry almost laughed out loud at the understatement. "Oh, this is worse than bad," he said incredulously. "This is... the scope of how bad it is, is immense. Kingsley doesn't know this, or Bright, or Hugo... only we three, McGonagall, and Snape. That's it. Now ten second years know? Okay, not all of it, but enough for it to be dangerous. Enough that if Voldemort found out, we'd lose Snape. I don't believe this..."

Clearly trying to be reassuring, Pansy said, "If we found out one thing last year, it's that they can keep a secret. They kept mine for a long time."

Harry couldn't argue with that, but found it hard to be reassured. He felt as though if this had been less bad, he would have lost his temper, but that this was so bad that it was almost ludicrous, comical. At the same time, he understood that it was very serious. "How did they overhear, anyway? As soon as Snape started yelling at me, I soundproofed the room."

"I don't know. Helen didn't give all the details, she just told me the main stuff. She was really nervous, she feels like they're in over their heads. She came to me to ask what I thought they should do. I told her I'd tell you, that you'd know what to do."

Harry did laugh out loud now, as the other three glanced at each other, concerned. "I appreciate your faith in me, Pansy, but I don't have a clue what I'm going to do. Well, not quite. I am going to talk to them, I know that much. What I'm going to say, or do beyond that, I don't know. But I suppose I'll think of something." Turning to Ginny and Hermione, he asked, "Would you mind if I talked to them now? I'd like to

get this over with, maybe... I don't know, relax for some of the evening. Doesn't seem likely, but you never know."

They nodded somberly, and dogs started coming out of Harry's wand one by one, until the tenth had run off. "I'll go out there, put out the carpet. Would you mind staying here? I'll probably need to talk to you when I'm finished." They nodded again. Turning to Pansy, he said, "Maybe you should be with me when I do this." Smiling a little, he added, "You are their mother, after all."

"Sure," she said, with a sad smile, obviously seeing how stressed he felt. He walked out into the classroom; Pansy followed and closed the door behind her.

Harry moved the chairs aside and conjured the carpet. He was about to sit when, on a sudden impulse, he reached out to hug Pansy instead. She hugged him back tightly. "It's been a really bad day," he said, as he felt himself seem to gain emotional strength from the hug. He felt her nod into his shoulder.

After about a half a minute, he let go. "Thanks," he said, looking at her appreciatively. "That really helped."

"Well, you're the one who said in his class that hugging is a good thing to be doing," she reminded him. They both sat down, Pansy slightly behind Harry to emphasize that he was the one speaking to the second years. Less than a minute later, they filed into the room and sat on the carpet in front of Harry. Looking at them, Harry saw something unusual for them: they looked frightened. He wondered why they should feel that way for knowing things they shouldn't know.

"Why do you all look like that?" he asked, then wondered if he should have been more diplomatic about it.

"It was the dogs," said David.

Harry looked at them blankly; Helen explained. "They usually jump up, they're happy to see us. This time, they just sat there, waiting. We think it means you're mad at us."

Harry nodded, more to himself than to them. It makes sense, he thought. "No, I'm not mad," he said wearily. "It's just been a bad day, and this... well, this is really bad. I called you because I wanted to find out how it happened, exactly what you know if there was anything you didn't mention to Pansy. First of all, it was a good idea to go to her. Now, how did you hear what I said to Snape?"

"One of us went to talk to you," said Helen. "The map told us you were in Snape's office, so that person went there to wait for you to finish. Then that person heard Snape yelling at you, and was concerned for you... and that person happened to be the one carrying the Extendable Ears. That person put them under the door to listen."

Harry looked at Pansy in astonishment, then back at the second years. "Why? Why would you do that?"

"They were scared, Professor!" said an obviously distressed Helen. "We know how Snape can be, but we know he's not supposed to yell at other teachers. The person thought it might be really bad, like I said, they were scared for you. They... just wanted to know what was happening."

Harry sighed; he was still angry, but he could understand why they would do that; he could see himself doing it, since he had done something like it as recently as fifth year. "You keep saying 'that person.' I assume that means you don't want to tell me who it was."

She nodded. "We all think we would have done the same thing, so we should all take responsibility for it." Her voice trembling a little, she added, "If you're going to be mad, you have to be mad at all of us."

He looked at them one by one. All were nervous and unhappy, but Hedrick was much more so than the rest, and he had an obviously guilty look. Harry instantly understood that Hedrick was the one who had done it, and wondered fleetingly if this was what Dentus had meant when he'd said that Harry's emotions showed very clearly on his face. Deciding he wanted to confirm it, he reached for his wand inside his robe sleeve, but didn't take it out. Holding it, he cast Legilimens on Hedrick, and immediately got a memory of Hedrick standing outside Snape's office door, listening on the Extendable Ears. Harry knew that Hedrick would notice the flash of memory, but would just assume it was a random memory caused by his guilt.

Harry decided not to tell them that he knew who it was. "I really think it'll be better if the person who did it just tells me—"

"We have to stick together, Professor!" said Helen, with emotion. "You taught us that!"

With equal emotion, Harry replied, "Stick together against enemies, against adversaries! Not me! Or is that how you see me right now?"

On the verge of tears, Helen pleaded, "Professor, don't say that! You know how we feel about you. We just knew you'd be mad at the one who did it, and we'd rather spread it out over all of us, because I really do think we would have all done the same thing."

Harry tried to calm himself, but still felt very emotional. "If I'm upset at you, it's more for not trusting me enough to tell me who it is than for the actual listening. If whoever did it trusts me, they'll tell me, and trust that I'll be reasonable about it."

Most of the Slytherins were looking down, upset but determined to stick to what they'd decided. Hedrick appeared to be in even greater distress, clearly feeling guilty over the difficulty his actions had caused.

Pansy spoke. "Listen, I think you should tell him. I can see it really bothers him that you won't, and here's why. You would tell each other this, you would admit you did something to each other. If you won't admit it to him, it means you don't trust him like you do each other, it gives a stronger idea that he's 'outside' the group. I kind of feel the same way. I'd like to think it was the twelve of us, not ten plus two on the outside--"

"I did it," interrupted Hedrick.

"Hedrick!" exclaimed Helen sharply. "We agreed--"

"But we didn't think of it this way, and they're right," said Hedrick firmly. "Pansy and Professor Potter aren't outsiders, we should be able to tell them anything we tell each other. I don't want them to feel that way."

"Thank you, Hedrick," said Harry sincerely. "I appreciate it." To the others, he said, "Look, I know your instinct is to protect each other, to stick together, and that's great. But you should do that against people who are trying to hurt you, not people who..." He paused to take a breath. "Not people who love you. I love you, all of you. I just wanted to make sure you knew that."

Most of them were trying not to cry, some unsuccessfully. "We love you too, Professor," said Helen, her eyes brimming with tears, as others nodded.

"I know, and it makes me really happy," he told them. He felt as though he wanted to wade into the group and hug all of them, but there were still serious things to talk about.

"Okay, now we need to think about what to do, how bad this is. First of all, I need to mention your knowing that Professor Snape is a spy against Voldemort. It's very, very important that no one know about this. If this gets out, Professor Snape would be killed, and we would lose him as a spy. His being a spy is extremely valuable. I can't say this strongly enough. We could lose the fight against Voldemort if anything happens to him. Do you understand?"

All ten nodded. "Professor," said Augustina, "When Hedrick told us, we understood that it was really serious, way more than we're supposed to know. After Pansy went to tell you, we talked some more. We agreed that you should do Memory Charms on all of us. It's better if we don't know this."

"I can't," he replied. "It's illegal, you're not seventeen."

"We don't care," said Hedrick.

"I do, though," said Harry. "Besides, I think you can keep these secrets, you've kept other important ones before. And doing that would only solve part of the problem; the other problem is what happens if Professor Snape finds out that you know this, that you were listening."

Helen nodded. "We were going to mention that, we're worried about that too. You said that he killed that reporter for knowing too much. We know too much. He doesn't know we know, but he will by viewing your memories, the same way he found out about Blaise."

"He wouldn't kill you," said Harry with slightly more confidence than he felt. "Ten of you would be too many, it would be noticed. He couldn't take the risk."

"I was hoping you would say 'he wouldn't do it because it would be wrong,' said Sylvia uneasily. "Or because we're students in his house, or something like that."

Harry shook his head. "He doesn't operate by what's right and wrong; his ultimate motivation for everything is defeating Voldemort. He wants that really badly, and would do anything to accomplish it, including get killed himself. He's risked his life, endured enormous difficulties, to do that. Doing anything to all ten of you would expose him."

"I'm not so sure, Harry," said a concerned Pansy. "They're in his house, after all. What if he did something that was made to look like an accident? I mean, I don't think he would either, but I'm not so sure that I'd risk their lives on it."

"No, I agree. I mean, I really don't think it would happen, but I won't take the chance either. But if he would kill them for knowing, then Memory Charms wouldn't stop him; he didn't think a Memory Charm on Skeeter would have been enough." Harry saw a few Slytherins exchange frightened looks. "No, we have to see to it that he doesn't find out about this, and there's only one way to do that. I'm going to have Hermione do a Memory Charm on me. I won't remember anything involving the second years about this situation."

"But Snape will know it's there, like Hermione found the other one that Snape gave you," pointed out Pansy. "Won't he wonder what's behind it? And he'll know it happened recently, because it wasn't there before."

"He can wonder all he wants, but he won't find out," said Harry firmly. "And I wouldn't be able to tell him anything anyway." He knew Snape would be angry at the breach of their understanding regarding Harry's memories, but he didn't want to get into that with Pansy and the second years.

"Are you sure, Professor?" asked Augustina, clearly worried.

"Yes, it's fine," he assured her. "There's nothing dangerous about getting a Memory Charm, you were all ready to do it. It just makes sense for it to be me instead. Hermione will remove it when it's no longer necessary, and I'll remember again."

Hedrick still looked stricken. "I'm really sorry, Professor--"

"It's okay, Hedrick," said Harry. He moved forward on the carpet and reached out to Hedrick, who moved closer to Harry. Harry wrapped him in a hug. "It's all right. I forgive you."

"Thank you," said Hedrick, his head on Harry's right shoulder, sniffing and clearly trying very hard not to cry.

Harry patted Hedrick's back. "It's the kind of thing I would have done."

"Helen said that," said Hedrick. Over Hedrick's shoulder, Harry glanced up at Helen with a playful frown and a smile. She smiled back through her own tears.

Harry let go of Hedrick, who went back to his seat on the carpet. "I don't suppose I need to give you a lecture on not saying anything to anybody, or anywhere but your dormitory. Not only the super-secret stuff, but the stuff about Blaise too. The whole reason I was arguing with Snape was that I don't want him expelled, I don't want everyone

knowing. He made a mistake, but like Thomas said, he deserves another chance. I think you all could imagine what it would be like to be in a dormitory with Malfoy and the others like that.

"There's a few things you have to keep in mind, before I let you go. One is, and now you would know this anyway, but anything that I know is something Snape could know. Obviously don't mention any of this around me, but also don't mention to me anything that you don't want Snape knowing. He doesn't know everything that happens to me, mainly just the important things. If you're not sure, or are worried, talk to Pansy. Don't make any reference to the Memory Charm, that you know about it. If he sees that, he'll know you're connected to it, and we don't want that.

"Also, be sure to act around Snape like you normally would. If you act all nervous around him, he could figure out that something was going on, maybe even connect it to my Memory Charm. Just pretend that everything's as usual in Potions, or if you see him in the Slytherin common room.

"Okay, I'm going to go have Hermione do the Memory Charm now. When it's done, I won't remember any of today's events that involved you; it'll be as though I never saw you today. Like I said, when it's not necessary anymore, she'll lift it. I hope that happens soon, because I want to remember this. You're all very important to me."

He stood, and they did as well. As he was going to say goodbye, Helen rushed forward and hugged him. Soon he was getting hugs from all of them, even the boys, as was Pansy. When he had hugged all of them, he felt his emotions rising again. "Okay, now I definitely want to remember this. That was very nice, thank you. And I promise the next time

my dog finds you, it'll be happy again." They thanked him and filed out.

Pansy put an arm around his shoulders. "You handled that very well, for someone who had such a bad day."

"There's something about being in a room with ten people who love you that helps your mood."

She raised an eyebrow. "Eleven people," she corrected him.

"Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Don't worry about it," she said, squeezing his shoulders and letting him go. "I know what you meant, I didn't take any offense."

"It's just that I've managed to offend three people today without meaning to," he explained. "I didn't want to make it one more."

They walked back to his office, and opened the door. "So, how did it go with them?" asked Hermione.

"Pretty well, I think they understand just how serious it is. There's still the problem of Snape knowing they know, of course. I've decided to deal with that by having you cover up anything to do with them with a Memory Charm."

Hermione nodded reluctantly. "That was kind of the only answer, but Snape's not going to like it at all. He'll expect everything to be available."

"That was before he showed that he can't be counted on to maintain any kind of discretion. Of course, I won't be able to tell him... well, I guess I can. You'll just have to tell me after you do the Charm why you did it, so I'll know what to tell

him. I'll still remember that he abused his discretion with this Blaise thing, so at least I'll understand what I'm telling him, if not exactly why. I need you to cover up everything from when Pansy interrupted to just before you do the Charm."

"Are you sure you don't want to wait a day, ask Albus what he thinks?" she asked. "There might be a reason why this isn't a good idea."

Harry shook his head. "I think Albus would tell me to do what I was comfortable with, but I'm not going to ask him anyway. I just don't trust Snape right now, and while I'm 99.9% sure that he wouldn't harm them, I'm not willing to take the chance with that other point one percent. Also, he'd make their lives miserable if he knew, especially Hedrick. I know what that's like, I don't want them put through that. No, I'm doing this. Albus won't be able to talk to me about it, but that's livable. I'm sure he'll respect the Memory Charm and not say anything about it."

"Okay, if you're sure," said Hermione. "Is there anything in particular you want me to tell you afterwards?"

He couldn't think of anything specific. "Just what you'd probably tell me anyway, keeping in mind that Snape will know whatever you tell me afterwards."

"Obviously," she agreed. "Shall I?"

"Go ahead."

Standing near the stream, Harry reached down and put his hand into the water. It was cool, clear, and felt very real for something he knew wasn't physical. He turned to see Dumbledore smiling at him. "As I have said before, while it is not... permanent as you understand it, it is no less real than

your normal physical environment. It is no surprise that it should feel real."

"I guess some things are hard to get used to," he said as he sat down, noticing that Snape was suddenly there.

"I knew I would be needed, after today's events," explained Snape. "Today was quite a challenge in terms of your attempting to help him."

"I wish I hadn't had to have Hermione do the Memory Charm... wait a minute, I can remember it! What happened with the second years! How can I remember? I couldn't after she did it."

"This is different from your waking conscious state," Dumbledore explained. "You are asleep; Memory Charms only function when you are awake. People sometimes dream of events covered by Memory Charms; the mind categorizes them and does not allow them to be remembered upon waking. When you wake up, you will not remember the events you had covered, nor any part of this conversation relating to them."

"Well, that's convenient," said Harry, surprised. "So, let me ask you first... did he ever try to do anything like that to you that he did to me, viewing my sexual memories to deliberately embarrass me?"

"Not as such, because he knew I could not be embarrassed," replied Dumbledore without false modesty. "But I take your meaning, and there were two occasions on which I believe he would have if he could have. One was immediately after the events at the end of your third year, in which Sirius was set free. We had a session later that night, but he was in no emotional condition to have one. I knew that beforehand, but I preferred to let him find out for himself. If he is too

angry, the sessions do not work as they should; he gets no emotional sustenance from them. Your decision to stop the session, while impulsive, was correct for more than one reason: he was getting nothing out of it except the sort of enjoyment he should not be experiencing, and as you pointed out, he was deliberately acting maliciously toward you, which is counterproductive."

"I wasn't happy about stopping," said Harry. "I just knew it was the right thing to do. How long will it be until he's back to normal?"

"It should be a few days," said Snape. "Maybe sooner. Certainly not long enough to jeopardize his overall mental state."

"You wish to know why he reacted so badly to what happened, which you viewed as relatively unimportant," continued Snape, responding, as Snape and Dumbledore often did, to the next question in Harry's mind. "He would not wish me to tell you, and will be angry that I have. But considering that you have had no secrets from him, and that this caused him to behave in a way that caused you distress and violated your understanding regarding how information was to be used or not used, you deserve to know."

"Many years ago, when I was a child—again, of course, when I say 'I' in this situation I refer to the fact that I was a part of him at that time—I was sexually abused by an associate of my father's. I was sufficiently confused and frightened at the time that I did not resist or fight, something about which I later came to be bitterly unhappy. I engaged in self-loathing for a period, but after I discovered the existence of homosexuals, I directed my anger in that direction, blaming them as a group for what had happened to me. It was also a very formative experience in that the bitterness it produced

helped steer me to my interest in the Dark Arts: partly as a means to defend myself against any such future attempts, and partly because it appealed to my anger, the dark part of me which was becoming stronger and stronger."

Good Lord, thought Harry, that sure explains a lot about Snape. The Cleansing explained how he became the way he currently was, but this explained how he ever got to a point where he would agree to the Cleansing. Harry felt great sympathy for Snape, and wondered how he would have been affected if he had endured what Snape had.

"It is a good question, and one which is useful to ask if you wish to empathize with him," said Snape. "No one can know, of course, not even you, but it is certainly a great trauma. Many who suffer it experience repercussions lasting a lifetime."

Harry nodded. "I can imagine. Well, not really, but you know what I mean. At least now I understand why he reacts so violently to anything to do with homosexuality, even making jokes about it."

"Yes, but there is something you should understand, which you currently do not because you lack the life experience to do so," said Dumbledore. "You see, Severus is placing blame where it does not belong. He refers to homosexuality as 'perversion,' and if referring to such abuse as he suffered, would use the same word. He does not make a distinction between the two, but there is an enormous difference.

Children are deeply harmed by sexual abuse.

Homosexuality, if practiced between consenting adults, harms no one. The only way in which they are similar is that they both involve sexual preferences other than is normal. Some men are sexually attracted to other men; a few are attracted to children. The latter are particularly cursed by

their inclinations, one could say, since they cannot avoid causing harm in satisfying their desires. Two men can make love and harm no one, but a man attracted to children must repress his sexual desires for all his life if he wishes to cause no harm.

"Like many others, Severus equates the two because they both involve sexual activity among two males, but this analogy is deeply flawed. Men such as the one who abused him are attracted to boys because they are children, not because they are male. Homosexuals have suffered from this prejudice for most of recorded history; only now, in the Western Muggle world, are large segments of the population becoming tolerant and accustomed to homosexuality. As Hermione explained, the wizarding world, being insular as it is, is quite behind this trend. One cannot be openly homosexual in the wizarding world and be accepted, whereas it is quite possible in much of the Muggle world. While not directly relevant to the situation with Severus, this is useful information for you to be aware of."

Harry was reminded of Hermione having given him similar informational lectures. "I assume that you were very accepting of this when you were physical."

"Of course. Throughout my life, a number of homosexuals sought me out for advice; not because I had any special understanding of their situation, but because they knew I would be understanding and as helpful as possible. More than once I attempted to explain to Severus what I have just explained to you, but unfortunately, he was simply irrational on the subject, and could not be persuaded. For the most part, we simply avoided the subject.

"You are correct when you say that Severus violated the understanding you had regarding how information obtained

from you was to be used, but you may wish to consider that he did not do so willfully, in a sense. This subject is so sensitive for him that one could almost say he was not in control of his actions. Even so, it is understandable that you found it necessary to have the Memory Charm done. You could not know when else he might breach your understanding. It was thoughtful of Hermione to suggest that you consult with me first, but you were correct; you did not need my assistance. Your 'gut' told you to do what you did, and you will do well to listen to it."

Harry addressed Snape. "Would he have actually killed them?"

"I cannot know that any more than you can," said Snape. "I can only reach the same conclusion as you: it is highly unlikely, but not impossible."

"How do you think he'll react when he finds the Memory Charm? Or, better yet, maybe I should ask, does he understand that he shouldn't have done what he did, what he tried to do, with Blaise?"

"Yes, they are very related questions," agreed Snape. "He does realize it, and this realization will become stronger as time passes. I believe he will resent the Memory Charm, but accept it as a consequence of what he did. As further evidence that your decision to have the Memory Charm done was reasonable, I will tell you that he spent some of last night considering ways in which he might have Blaise expelled which would not directly violate Minerva's instructions, but could not think of any. He plans, the next time he sees Blaise, to do Legilimens on him in order to discover the identity of the other person involved, and look for pretexts to expel them if possible. Yes, that does violate Minerva's instructions, but he can easily justify it to himself."

Frustrated, Harry shook his head. "I can't believe it... well, I can, but... I want to ask you if you think I should tell Professor McGonagall, but I know that's the kind of thing you won't give an opinion about. I'll think about it after I wake up. About Blaise, the only thing I can do is give him a Memory Charm, if he'll agree to it."

"He may well not agree," suggested Dumbledore. "A Memory Charm is not a small thing, and he may not have such a great interest in protecting the identity of the other person involved. It also may not be in his best interest to be unable to access the memory; such experiences are an important part of how we learn."

"Damn," muttered Harry, sure that Dumbledore was right. "Doesn't Snape know that this jeopardizes what we do even more?"

"He is irrational on the subject," Snape reminded him. "Also, he thinks that you will not find out what he plans, at least not until he has found a way to expel them. And yes, this is not information I would normally provide. But I will tell you things about him, because I am him, in a sense, and therefore somewhat entitled. I also believe that your being aware of this will help in the long term."

"Okay, thanks," said Harry. "I'll think more about this in the morning, also." He talked with Dumbledore and Snape for a little longer, then resumed his sleep.

* * * * *

"Harry!" John greeted him as he and Hermione walked into the staff room with their phoenixes after lunch the next day. "So, how much are you being paid to protect the Minister?"

Harry chuckled. "He'll be in my debt, which is better anyway," he joked. He knew that the staff would all have read the story in that morning's Prophet.

"May I ask, Harry," asked Dentus, "how the decision was reached to make that information public?"

"I'm not sure. I don't participate in that kind of decision, of course. I guess Professor McGonagall would know." He glanced at her, asking the same question without words.

"Since Voldemort knew, there was no advantage in keeping it secret," she said. "We find it generally preferable not to keep secret that which is not necessary to keep secret. I assume you are thinking of the political repercussions of it being publicly known that Harry saved the Minister's life."

Dentus nodded. "Harry's joke aside, Bright will be in Harry's debt, in a public way. I'm sure Bright understood this might happen when he asked for Harry's protection, but it was understandably a second priority to staying alive."

"You mean, he'd just as soon not be in Harry's debt in quite this way," clarified John.

"Politicians would rather not be in anyone's debt, at least not in debts such as this one, which can't be easily repaid with a political favor. But I'm sure he considered the fact that it's better to be indebted to Harry in this way than most anyone else."

"Why is that?" wondered a puzzled Harry.

Dentus glanced at Hermione, giving her a silent quiz. Smiling briefly in response, she said to Harry, "You're less likely than most other people to call in the debt. He'd know that you'd be uncomfortable going to him one day and

saying, 'I saved your life, so please do this for me.' As he said last month, that's not the way you work."

"But if I ever needed something from him and asked him, even if I didn't mention this, he'd think about this as a factor, right?"

Dentus nodded, mildly impressed. "Yes, he would. He would know you didn't intend to imply that he should, but he would anyway. If an Auror had saved him, he wouldn't really have a debt; that's their job. But you, you didn't have to do this."

"But he knows I did it because it was the right thing to do."

"Yes, and a politician's version of the right thing to do is to make what you've done for him a consideration in this kind of situation," Dentus pointed out.

"There is one thing he has done already," said McGonagall. Turning to Harry, she explained, "He contacted me this morning and asked me to relay an invitation: he would like you and Ginny to join him and his wife for dinner."

Harry glanced at Hermione, who was wearing an amused smile. "Yes, I thought you'd like that," he said.

To the other teachers, she explained, "Harry would rather spend the evening with Arthur and Molly, if he had the choice."

"We may not know him as well as you, but we do know him well enough to know that," said Sprout. "You will go, though, won't you, Harry?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't feel right saying no. And it's not as though I don't like him, he's interesting to talk to. I just don't

have much experience being invited to dinner."

"I daresay that's only because you haven't made yourself available," said Sprout. "If you did, you wouldn't have to pay for food for a year."

Hermione chuckled. "I think I'd rather buy my own food," said Harry. "Speaking of which, did he say where it would be?"

"Yes, he said it could be at his home, or the Golden Dragon," said McGonagall. "Whichever one you'd prefer. I hope I was not too presumptuous, but I did inform him of your likely choice."

There were chuckles all around. "I would say that he was giving Harry a test, but I don't think he'd bother. No doubt he was just being polite," said Dentus.

Harry tried not to be annoyed, knowing that they were amused both by knowing which he'd choose before he had, and that he wouldn't understand Dentus's reference. Sighing, he asked, "What test?"

"Most people, especially politicians, given this choice would choose the Golden Dragon, because being seen having dinner publicly with the Minister of Magic means that you have his support and endorsement, it's a kind of political currency," explained Dentus. "He would know that you wouldn't seek it because of that, though. Ironically, he would benefit by being seen with you in a way he wouldn't with anyone else; it would be like getting your endorsement. But he knows that you'll choose his home because you don't care to be a spectacle in public, talked about in whispers, and so forth. As I said, he was just being polite in giving you the choice."

Harry grunted. "I should choose the restaurant, just so you'd all be wrong. But, unfortunately, I don't like being a spectacle in public, talked about in whispers, and so forth. Oh, well."

"It's good of you to have a sense of humor about it," said Sprout encouragingly. "I'm sure it won't be so bad."

"No, I don't mean I think it will be," said Harry. "I'm just not that comfortable in that situation with people I don't know that well. But I know this is another thing I have to get used to."

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione, "How did your first years do?"

"Not bad, better than I expected," he replied. Seeing that the other teachers didn't know what they were talking about, he explained, "This week, I'm doing the 'Blue' test for all my classes, for the first time since the first class. It's only been two months, so I don't expect much change. But most of the first years' numbers went up; I don't know if that would be normal, because we don't usually measure them that young. I've got the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw sixth years this afternoon at three; that should be a better indicator."

"Do you think anybody will have it?" asked Flitwick.

Harry shook his head firmly. "No, it's way too soon. I'd be amazed if anyone had it."

"Just out of curiosity, if you had to guess who'd be the first person to get it, who would it be?" wondered John.

Harry thought for a minute. "I guess I'd say Luna."

A few teachers were surprised, but John wasn't. "I can see that. She's comfortable in her own skin, and that probably

counts for a lot with what you do."

"Do you think girls are going to get this faster than boys?" asked Sprout.

"I think so. In classes, the girls are generally more comfortable with it. Not that some of the boys aren't doing well, but they seem to have to make a bigger effort."

"Who do you think will be the first boy to get it?" asked Hermione.

After more thought, he answered, "Justin and Colin are the first two that come to mind." None of the teachers seemed surprised at his guesses. He found that despite his attempt to maintain low expectations, he definitely had hopes that at least one student would manage it.

Near the end of the hour, McGonagall got up to leave, and asked Harry to come with her. They walked to the Transfiguration teacher's office, and sat. Before she spoke, Harry did. "Professor, I wanted to apologize—"

She waved him off. "I actually called you in here to tell you that I regret having lost my temper. I appreciate your apology and understand the reason for it, but this is another of those 'he is only seventeen' situations. Even some adults might not have recognized my sensitivity to what you said."

"Hermione explained it to me, of course," he admitted ruefully. "I wouldn't have figured it out. I really didn't mean to compare you to him. I know that's what I did anyway, and I feel bad about it. I'm sorry."

She nodded understandingly. "It would be very hard for you not to. Anyone would think it, it is just a matter of whether they would say it or not. People will compare me to him,

Harry. It is unavoidable, and I must get used to it. May I ask what Albus said last night? I assume you talked to him."

"We talked about a few things; he spent some time saying basically that there's nothing wrong with two men or two women being in love if they want to. I guess from what you said last night that you don't agree with him."

Looking uncertain, McGonagall replied, "We discussed the topic more than once; this is hardly the first time such a thing has happened at Hogwarts. I cannot say I think he is wrong; he has an excellent point. I simply cannot make myself comfortable with the idea." Eyeing him appraisingly, she added, "I have a feeling you will, though."

He shrugged lightly. "Hermione agrees with Albus. She compared it to a food that you really hate: you wouldn't want to eat it yourself, but you wouldn't stop someone else from doing it if they wanted to. I could see where that made sense; I just have to think more about the concept and less about the details."

"Yes, that would be helpful," agreed McGonagall wryly. Turning more serious, she said, "Harry, I understand why you did not come to me about the matter regarding Mr. Zabini, but I would like to think that I can be trusted with such information. I would like to know that you would tell me things that you know I would want to know. Is that something you think you can do?"

Uncomfortably, he nodded. Part of him didn't want to, because the fact was that he didn't regard her like he did Dumbledore, and knew she would make different decisions than he would. On the other hand, he felt she did deserve his trust. "There is one thing. Last night, the Snape that's with Albus told me that Professor Snape plans to disregard

your instructions about the Blaise thing. He plans to yank out the memory from Blaise about who the other boy was, and see if he can find a pretext to have them expelled eventually."

McGonagall sighed in frustration. "Well, you predicted it. Very well, I will take what action I feel is appropriate. You should do nothing further regarding this. Is there anything else?"

Harry realized that she wasn't telling him what action she planned to take because Snape would view the memory. He briefly considered telling her about the Memory Charm, but realized that there was nothing he could really tell her. He had a feeling that whatever was under the Memory Charm was something she would want to know, but he couldn't be sure. Also, if he told her about the Charm, she might go to Hermione and ask to be told what it hid, and he didn't want to put Hermione in the position of choosing between what he wanted and what McGonagall wanted.

"No, nothing else," he said.

"Very well, then, I believe it is almost time for Charms," she said. They left the room and went their separate ways.

After his sixth year Defense Against the Dark Arts class ended at four-fifty, Harry took Fawkes to the Aurors, then went with Kingsley to Bright's residence. Putting down the plot only took an hour, after which Ginny joined him in Bright's living room, where they were joined by Bright's wife, Madeline. Like her husband, she was attractive; she had brown hair, large eyes, and a slightly large nose, which didn't detract from her appearance. Harry felt she looked younger than what he assumed her age to be.

"I'm very happy to be able to thank both of you properly," she said in greeting them. Harry didn't know whether to offer to shake her hand or not, but was soon spared the decision: she approached him and kissed him on the cheek. "That was for saving my husband," she said, and moving on to Ginny, added, "And this is for saving me." She kissed Ginny's cheek as well. "Thank you both so much."

Slightly embarrassed, Harry just nodded. "We were happy to do it," said Ginny.

Rudolphus motioned them to chairs, and they all sat. "We were also implored by our house-elf to pass along her thanks. Apparently one of the Hogwarts house-elves has made it his mission to spread your legend among the house-elf community, not that they wouldn't know about you anyway." Noting Ginny's smile, he asked, "Is there some story about that?"

Harry explained his history with Dobby, relating the incidents involving him five years ago and ending with how he tricked Lucius Malfoy into giving Dobby a sock. Grinning, Bright said, "Why, you clever little rascal. I'd love to have seen his face."

Ginny took up the story. "Naturally, that earned Harry Dobby's eternal adoration, and he wastes no opportunity to talk about Harry in ways that he doesn't understand Harry finds extremely embarrassing, since to Dobby, it's just the obvious truth."

The Brights laughed. "House-elves aren't too sensitive to that kind of thing," remarked Rudolphus. "I offered to let her tell you herself, but she was far too embarrassed, to be in the presence of someone so... you get the idea."

Ginny reached over and squeezed Harry's hand for a second, saying, "Yes, sometimes I feel that way too."

Harry smiled tolerantly as the Brights laughed again. "The last thing you ever are is embarrassed," he retorted. "I don't think I've seen you embarrassed once since we've been together."

"Maybe once or twice," she allowed. "But I really don't need to, you get embarrassed enough for the both of us."

"It must be very strange, being Harry Potter's intended," commented Madeline. "I don't mean that in a bad way, of course," she added to Harry.

"It's wonderful," said Ginny, with a smile at Harry, "but I know what you mean. Things do happen to me that wouldn't otherwise, and not only good things. But when you love someone, you take whatever comes along with them, good or bad."

"Yes, I know about that," Madeline responded, with a fleeting look of fear; Harry wondered if she was remembering yesterday's attack. "I can't say I was thrilled that Rudolphus decided to go for the Minister's job, but as he said at the time, someone had to do it. Not that he was the only one who tried, but if you let yourself be intimidated into not doing something you would normally do, you're not really living your life. It's easy to understand that in the abstract, just a little more difficult after yesterday."

No one said anything for a moment, then Rudolphus broke the silence. "Harry, it could be my imagination, but are you a little happier today than usual?"

Harry and Ginny broke out in smiles. "You should have seen him earlier, he was delirious," said Ginny. "He was almost as

happy as I've ever seen him." She gestured for Harry to explain.

"This week, I'm checking all my students to see how they're coming along with the energy of love. You may have read that the way I know if they have it is if their non-vocalized spells are as effective as their vocalized ones. I didn't expect that anyone would have it already, after only two months, but one person did it."

Rudolphus's eyebrows rose. "Who?"

"Luna Lovegood."

"Oh, yes, her father runs that magazine, the one that ran the interview you did when you were trying to get the word out about Voldemort," recalled Rudolphus.

"It happened in the class that I take from him," continued Ginny. "When Harry saw that '100' show up after she did the spell, he reacted as if Gryffindor had just won the Quidditch Cup. I won't embarrass him by imitating what he did, but he was... exuberant. Then he walked over and hugged her. It was great."

Now the Brights smiled. "That's wonderful," said Madeline.

"I recall that you were hesitant about teaching it," added Rudolphus. "I suppose that makes this even sweeter."

"I was worried that maybe only a few people would get it, and I still don't know for certain that that won't be the case. But this is a really good sign, which is why I was, I am, so happy. I always knew Luna had a good chance; she's very serene, not much bothers her. It's also really good that this was the first one to happen in a classroom, not just my friends and I together. If she can get it, others can too. I

think this'll help other people's motivation, give them more hope."

"It's funny that it happened to be her," said Ginny. To the Brights, she explained, "Her personality is kind of... odd, I guess. She wears strange clothes, she believes the stuff her father prints, she says odd things. She's a very nice person, just strange. I have a feeling this is going to change how people see her."

"I hope so," said Harry. "Actually, I think she won't care about that. The thing I've always liked about her is that she doesn't care what people think about her."

"Harry can identify with that," grinned Ginny. "Being so famous as he's always been, he's happiest when he can manage that."

"As opposed to someone like me, whose primary concern at all times is what people think of me," said Rudolphus in a self-mocking way.

"That's from professional necessity, not ego," pointed out Madeline.

He shrugged. "Maybe, but you know that I've wondered whether anyone gets into politics without having a pretty healthy ego in the first place. And even if you didn't start with one, you're bound to end up with one." To Harry and Ginny, he said, "You'd be amazed at the number of politicians who forget, at least occasionally, that people are being nice to them because they want something in return, not because they're such wonderful people."

"Well, I want to know more about what happened in that class, I think it's fascinating," said Madeline, with a glance at

her husband that suggested that he had wrongly steered the topic in a different direction. "How did the class react?"

"Everyone was quiet, because they were so surprised," said Ginny. "But after Harry finished hugging her and she went back to her seat, she got a round of applause. After Harry finished testing everyone else, he asked her to talk about what she had done, what it was like for her. I think she did the best she could, but I'm not sure what she said will help anyone else. It would be like if Harry tried to explain what makes him a really good Seeker."

"Some things, like natural talent, aren't easy to put into words," agreed Rudolphus. "Like Madeline and her art."

"Oh, you do art?" asked Ginny. "What kind?"

"Mainly two-dimensional paintings, but when I get four I really like, I get ambitious and try to do a Ring of Reduction based on them," she said. "Often it doesn't turn out how I'd like and I don't keep it, but a few have been all right. It's a real challenge to do something in three dimensions and have it look good."

"It shouldn't surprise you to know that I think she's just being modest," put in Rudolphus.

"Professor Flitwick said you needed strong magical ability to do that kind of artwork," noted Harry.

"Oh, you'd be working on that right now, wouldn't you," said Madeline. "What is yours going to be?"

"He won't tell anyone, he says he wants us to be surprised when we see it," said Ginny, feigning annoyance at Harry's behavior.

"That's really just because I'm not sure what it's going to be," joked Harry. "Well, okay, I think I know what one is going to be, but I want that to be a surprise. The others, I have a few ideas, but I haven't decided."

"With your strength, you could do something really impressive," said Rudolphus.

"Professor Flitwick mentioned that. In class, in front of everyone." The others grinned, imagining his reaction, part of which was currently reflected on his face. "It was mainly to tease me, I'm sure. Also, I think it was partly because of Hermione. She said in the staff room last week that my strength is annoying in Transfiguration, because I can do some of the things without really learning the way I'm supposed to. She said she won't call on me anymore when asking for volunteer demonstrations. Something about it being a bad example for the other students. Also, a few times when she's assigned essays, she's given me this look, like, yes, you have to do it too, even if you might not need to. So Professor Flitwick is letting me know he's holding me to a higher standard."

"How is Hermione liking teaching?" asked Rudolphus.

"She really likes it," answered Ginny. "She gets all excited telling us about it, how one of the first years did this or that. But some things frustrate her, like students who obviously didn't study and do poorly, or who studied a little the day before, just enough to write a not-very-good essay. She knows that not everyone's going to be like her, but she didn't realize it would be quite like it is."

"She's complained about it a few times," added Harry. "The last time she did, I told her that she shouldn't be surprised, that that's the kind of work Ron and I would have done most

of the time if we hadn't had her around helping us. For some reason it didn't make her feel better."

"I wouldn't say that to her again, if I were you," advised Ginny, as the Brights chuckled.

"That must be an interesting aspect to your group now," said Madeline. "Two of you teachers, with phoenixes. Does that change how the group feels, or interacts?"

Ginny thought. "And two Legilimens, which may be even more important. But no, I don't think it changes how we feel as a group. They don't act differently because of it; it would affect the group if they did. Their status as teachers doesn't really matter, because they're already sort of the unofficial leaders of the group. Harry is like the heart of the group. We look to him for leadership; he inspires the rest of us to do what we do. Hermione is the brain of the group, the one we can count on to know what to do and how to do it. The things you mentioned that they have in common affect the relationship between the two of them, not their relationship with the rest of the group. They definitely have the closest relationship of any two of the group that aren't a couple."

She turned to Harry. "By the way, speaking of the phoenixes, after the class I found out that Hermione knew what happened right away. You were so happy that it traveled from Fawkes to Flora to Hermione; she said she got an image of Luna and the gold '100' in the air, and of course she got your feelings. She was with Neville in the common room, and she used the pendants to tell Ron and Pansy. They were happy too, though apparently Ron's exact words were, 'You couldn't have had a look at the map first?'

Harry giggled briefly, then explained the maps. "So, it means that they were in one of the couples' places at the

time."

A door opened, and Madeline looked across the room at it. "It seems that dinner is ready." Everyone got up, and Madeline led them into the dining room.

They took their seats, and they ate slowly as they continued their conversation. Rudolphus made a reference to a security-related matter, inspiring Harry to ask about something he'd wanted to for a while. "Rudolphus, can you tell me what's going on with the Ministry's ability to keep Death Eaters locked up?"

"Or, lack of ability, you mean," corrected Rudolphus unhappily. "I'm not surprised you ask, I can see where that would be a subject of some interest to you. Unfortunately, it's not the kind of thing that has any quick solution. Losing Azkaban was a real blow, obviously. We have to start from scratch, and it's not easy. What we need is a real facility, designed for this purpose, which we don't have now and can't be built quickly. As you know, the problem isn't keeping the people from escaping, but keeping others from breaking them out. There just aren't any places that are both that secure, and suitable for holding prisoners.

"We're in the planning stages now of building a modern wizard prison. Right now we're looking at building designs and plans for magical safeguards; naturally, the magic that's put in place in and around the building is as important for security as the building itself. Once that's done, then we'll be able to start construction; with any luck, that could begin before the new year. But the unpleasant fact is that at best, this prison wouldn't be ready for another year. There's just no way around it, and nothing to be done in the meantime but do what we've been doing and hope for the best."

"And I'm guessing that it wouldn't be all that hard for Voldemort or Death Eaters to sabotage this while it's being built," said Harry.

"Very true," confirmed Rudolphus, "and that was part of the reason that nothing had been done until now. It's been almost two years since the dementors left Azkaban; you'd think we'd be further along than this. Even after Fudge saw Voldemort and started turning things around, nothing was done, mainly out of bureaucratic inertia. It wasn't until the prison break the day Hogsmeade was attacked that the question was even considered. Fudge was persuaded not to even make a start on the project, and he cited this as the main reason. I don't agree, of course; that it might fail isn't a good reason not to even try. We'll keep trying until we do it."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Harry. "Besides the obvious reason, part of the reason I wondered was that editorial in the Prophet last month. I'd hate to think it would get so bad that people would think that killing prisoners was the way to do things."

"Certainly, that's not something I want to see either," agreed Rudolphus. "As Dentus probably told you, it was written by an undersecretary who wanted to see what kind of response the idea would get. I don't even think the person who wrote it particularly advocates it. We haven't killed people for a long time; we like to think we're beyond that. On an individual basis, the relatives of a particular murder victim would tend to be in favor of it, but that's revenge, not justice." Harry thought of Molly saying she wanted Percy's killers to suffer, and Neville, in his grief and rage, wanting to drive Bellatrix Lestrange insane. He wondered what Molly would think of the execution of Death Eaters, over half a year after her son's death.

* * * * *

Harry had just taken his usual lunch seat the next day when he saw Pansy walking toward them, smiling broadly.

"Congratulations," she said.

"You, too," he said, as she took her seat. Seeing Ron and Ginny's quizzical looks, he explained. "The early class, my early class, was Gryffindor/Slytherin second year. Helen and Sylvia got 100."

"Wow, that's great," said Ron. "You two must be really happy." To Hermione, he asked, "Did you get this through the phoenixes too?"

She nodded. "They were a couple of minutes apart, I think. I was teaching the other second years, and I told them about it. They were pretty impressed, both with the information, and how I got it. So how did the class do as a whole?"

"I felt a little bad for the Gryffindors, because they were so far behind the Slytherins. None of the Gryffindors were above 80, and none of the Slytherins were below 80. Brian asked the Slytherins how they did so well; Hedrick said they had sessions of their own. Then Helen stood up and hugged him from behind, around his neck, and said that they'd been 'practicing.' It got a huge laugh, of course. Then Andrea said maybe the Gryffindors needed to practice, which got another laugh. The Slytherins didn't mention that you'd been helping them," he said to Pansy. "I'm sure that that, along with their general closeness, had a lot to do with it."

Pansy and Hermione exchanged a glance, a look that suggested to Harry that they knew another reason the Slytherins had done well. "I hope so. Thanks for calling me on the pendant after the class to let me know," said Pansy.

"I just wish you could have been there. Anyway, they did fantastic. Not only the two 100's, but Hedrick and Augustina were both at 94, Vivian at 91, and David at 90."

"Wow..." marveled Pansy. "That's so great. If you'd told me they were all in the eighties, I'd have been happy with that. Of course, they've been doing it longer than the others too, since we started in August. This is going to get a lot of attention around the school."

"Yeah, it will," agreed Harry. "The Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw class knew about the 100's because Hermione told them, and they seemed kind of discouraged that none of them did better than 80 either. They had improved over two months ago, and I told them that. When they asked why the Slytherins had done so well, I explained that they banded together strongly last year while fighting Malfoy, and by keeping track of Malfoy and the others; they had a mission, and they had to stick together to do it. Not that you need a mission, I told them, but it helps to be close, to do things together."

"That may be a good aspect of what happened," suggested Neville. "If the other classes ask why the Slytherins did so well, and they probably will, you can explain that to them. The fact that they work together so well can be sort of a model for other classes."

"That's true, I hadn't thought of that," said Harry. "It can be something to aim for, not something to be jealous of. I wonder if Luna, Helen, and Sylvia are going to get asked to help other groups."

"That would be funny, other students asking Luna for help like that," remarked Ron. "Considering the opinion that people have always had of her."

"Yes, it reminds me of that Christmas song, 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,'" said Hermione, drawing puzzled looks from the others. "You would know the song, Harry, but for the rest of you..." She recited the lyrics, then continued, "So, the other reindeer didn't like him, because he was different. But then when it turned out to be useful, all of a sudden they loved him, they wanted him to help. I always felt like Rudolph should have made sure they understood how wrong they'd been before he agreed to help them."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I hadn't thought of it like that, but I see your point. Kind of makes the song more depressing."

"Leave it to Hermione to read deep meaning into a children's song," said Ron, rolling his eyes.

"But it really is a comment about human nature, an allegory, even if it is unintentional," protested Hermione. "That's the way most people are. Harry's experienced both sides of that. His aunt and uncle treated him badly because he was a wizard-different-and people in the wizarding world treated him better because he was different in a good way, when neither had to do with who he really was." No one had any immediate comment. "Well, it's true," she muttered.

"I have a feeling that Luna would help anyone if they asked her," said Pansy. "As I found out last year, like this Rudolph, she seems not to hold grudges."

"Maybe she can advise people that one way to help reach the state necessary is to not hold grudges," suggested Neville humorously.

"Makes sense," agreed Harry. He realized that probably no other students would have developed the ability to use the energy of love so quickly. Still, three had, which was three

more than he had expected. He resumed his lunch, reveling in the satisfaction he felt. Three was a good start.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 15, Grindelwald: Harry gives a lecture to Dentus's class on Dumbledore's past; the younger Slytherins are given their first chance to use the energy-of-love spells.

From Chapter 15: "Why us?" asked Sylvia, puzzled. "Just because we can use the energy of love? Other people are going to learn it, too."

"That's the point," explained Harry. "Voldemort wants to scare other people into not learning it, because it's a threat to him."

Harry saw satisfied, determined looks on a few faces. "Well, then, we're just going to try twice as hard," said David firmly.

15. Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Grindelwald

Snape resumed the sessions four days later, and did not comment on what had happened that Sunday, though Harry found him even less chatty than usual. To Harry's great surprise, when Snape discovered the Memory Charm, he made no comment at all. Harry almost wished Snape had, so he would have a better idea of where things stood with him. Still, considering what had happened, a lack of open hostility was probably as much as Harry could hope for. There appeared to be no consequences to Blaise either, at least that Harry could see.

Over the next four weeks, all was normal at Hogwarts, but Voldemort and the Death Eaters were stepping up their activities. Not only was there an increase in killings, both of wizards and especially Muggles, but also Voldemort led jailbreaks at Australia's only wizard prison, and both American ones. Over two hundred wizards escaped in all, and it was assumed that at least some would be induced to join Voldemort. On the first Saturday of December, at lunch with Neville and some of the Aurors, Harry was surprised to discover that not all of the Aurors had a gloomy view of the jailbreaks.

"It's going to make our lives a bit more difficult, no question," acknowledged Kingsley after swallowing the last of his food. "But from reading the Prophet, it seems a lot of people don't realize that these are not exactly ready-to-go Death Eaters that he's recruiting. Some are petty criminals, and a lot of the more serious criminals aren't the type that

are going to be eager to become Death Eaters; Voldemort demands a certain discipline that most criminals who've always operated independently are going to have a hard time adapting to."

Harry almost commented, 'Not to mention that they're not going to agree to the Cleansing,' before he remembered that he was the only one there with knowledge of it. Before he thought of something else to say, Neville spoke. "But we should assume he put them under the Imperius Curse, right?"

"At first, yes," agreed Kingsley, "but it would be a lot of work to keep two hundred people under the Imperius Curse for any length of time. What he needs are willing helpers, and that's going to be tougher for him now. We're pretty sure Harry's put a damper on his recruiting pitch. He can't exactly say, 'come join the strongest wizard in the world' and have it be credible. So, even though some of the new ones may have to be coerced into joining him, they may be his best bet. He can reasonably hope that they're not aware of what you can do to him, and he can always do a Memory Charm on anyone who seems like they might be a good recruit but hesitates to join him because of Harry, make them forget they ever heard of Harry."

"Well, if they have to go that far, then that's really a good sign," said Neville, prompting nods of agreement around the table. Harry wondered what Snape would have to say about it, but Snape was away for the weekend; he wondered whether Snape was helping train or otherwise deal with those who had been broken out of prison.

Kingsley looked at Harry. "By the way, I wanted to mention at some point that a few days ago, Dawlish and I met with our American counterparts to talk about the prison breaks

and compare notes. They asked about you, and about the energy of love. I told them about it, and that you were working with some Aurors."

"I hadn't thought about that," said Harry. "Am I well-known in America?"

"You're not a household word like you are here, but people who read the newspapers will have heard of you, and definitely the American Aurors know about you now, since like us they keep abreast of Dark wizarding developments internationally. They know that you've faced him a few times, and the Cruciatus and Killing Curse shields were big news at the time in international wizarding circles, not only here. Anyway, the Americans were interested in meeting you, but I put them off, told them how busy you were. I had a feeling it wasn't the kind of thing you'd be keen on doing."

"Kingsley has amazing observational skills," remarked Tonks.

Harry nodded. "Not that I'd mind meeting them especially, but yes, I can think of a lot of things I'd rather be doing with the time. Do you think they might help us out?"

"We mentioned the idea to them. They were... noncommittal, which I expected. They have their own problems too, though not nearly so many as we do; they say they're stretched a bit thin. Like us, they don't have as many Aurors in their ranks as they'd like. I think they'd help out in emergencies, but not on a day-to-day basis."

Harry and Neville asked a few more questions about the international wizarding situation, then got up and followed Kingsley to the training area. Alone with him and Neville, Harry asked a question he'd wanted to ask at the table but hadn't for security reasons. "How are the relays coming along?"

"We're starting to deploy them," said Kingsley. "Our projections are that we can have England completely covered in four months, with another month for Scotland and Northern Ireland. After that, hopefully, we'll be able to know where Voldemort is if he's anywhere in Britain. Sooner, if we get lucky and drop a relay in the right place."

"What do you mean, 'hopefully?'" asked Neville before Harry could.

"We can't know for sure that he won't come up with some sort of countermeasure," pointed out Kingsley. "We think he doesn't know about this, but it's not impossible that he could've gotten to one of the researchers that Hermione was working with. If so, it's possible that he could find a way to avoid being tracked, like imbue some clothing with a spell that blocks the signal. I'm not saying I think it's likely, just that it could happen."

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Harry.

Kingsley shrugged lightly. "Just one of those little things you learn from being around a while. Things often don't go as planned, including things a lot more certain than this. This is totally new, so things could go wrong even if Voldemort doesn't know. Of course, it's also possible that Voldemort could find out, and be unable to do anything about it. We'll just have to see what happens."

"Assuming everything goes right, I guess eventually he'd have to go to another country, right?" wondered Neville. "What would we do then?"

Kingsley chuckled wryly. "To quote the Minister, 'then, he becomes someone else's problem.'"

Harry's mouth dropped open in astonishment; he was amazed that Bright would be so cavalier. "He said that? What the... what kind of attitude is that?"

"A very political one," said Kingsley. "But I should add, it was made at least partly in jest. It's not as though he doesn't care personally about the people in other countries who Voldemort could kill. It was more of a recognition of the political reality that most British wizards would say 'thank goodness he's gone,' and not clamor to put resources into tracking him down if he's not bothering us anymore. I'm sure we would help whoever ends up with him; I hope we would give them the intelligence on the relays, and give them the means to make their own if they wanted. Of course, there would be some who wouldn't want to do that; they'd fear, reasonably, that the intelligence could be compromised, and Voldemort could use it to find a defense against the detection, in which case our advantage would be lost. In politics, Harry, acts of altruism are very rare. People look out for their own first."

Harry's mind flashed back to McGonagall telling him to finish evacuating the Hogwarts wounded after the fire, while wounded attackers lay dying. He knew it wasn't the same as all of what Kingsley was saying, just the last sentence. "I assume that Bright knows that I'm not going to just shrug if that happens."

"I think that's safe to say," said Kingsley. "Look, Harry, I don't want you to judge him based on that. When you repeat a remark like that, you lose tone of voice, facial expressions, and context. I know you wouldn't be happy with what he said no matter how he said it, but I do think it came across differently when he said it."

"If you say so," said Harry doubtfully, as Dawlish entered the room.

"Ah, thanks for coming," said Kingsley to Dawlish. "Harry, Neville, what we're going to start on now is one of the more important aspects of being an Auror: the ability to detect Dark magic. The fact is, not every Auror can do this. You can still be an Auror even if you can't, it's just very helpful. Some can't at first, then gradually develop the ability. It's very tricky, very sensitive.

"Dark magic is very powerful, and therefore the easiest kind of magic to sense in ways other than the standard five senses. The way to start trying to do it is to clear your mind, to turn off the other five senses as much as you can. If you're sensitive to it at all, you may feel something, even if you don't know what it is."

"But Harry can do this already, can't he?" asked Neville. "I mean, the department store attack... he sensed it just before it happened."

"Yes, I was going to mention that," agreed Kingsley. "Clearly, Harry has the potential to do this. The question is whether it'll only manifest itself in life-threatening situations, or if it's dependable and can be refined. So, Harry, let's give it a try." He handed Harry a thick blindfold. "Put this on, and I'll enchant Dawlish so that he makes no noise whatsoever. He'll do a test Dark spell on me; what we want you to do is see if you can tell when it's happening, and see if you can come close to identifying where he's standing, where the spell originated."

Harry nodded as he put the blindfold on. He immediately cleared his mind, something that came easily to him after so much practice. He focused on remembering what it had felt

like on the occasions when he had sensed Dark magic being done nearby, and when he had worked on this with Dumbledore. He was surprised that Dumbledore apparently hadn't mentioned to the Aurors that they'd worked on refining his skill; his next thought was that he shouldn't be thinking, and refocused on emptying his mind.

After a minute, he felt something. He knew it was what he'd felt before, and he even knew where it was coming from, though he didn't think about how he knew. He pointed his wand to his right and fired the Blue spell. A second later he heard Kingsley say, "Um, okay, I think you can take the blindfold off."

Harry did, and looked to his right to see a blue Dawlish looking at him in surprise. "I hadn't even done the damn spell yet, though I was just about to. I would ask you how you did that, but I never get a very good answer when I do, so I think I won't bother."

"Yes, I'm afraid I really couldn't tell you," agreed Harry. "This was the first time I ever tried to get the location, so I'm glad that worked. I can see where this would be really useful."

"That's putting it mildly," said Kingsley. "This is a big part of being an Auror, and not many of us could do what you just did. Hell, you might be able to track a Dark wizard even if he wasn't using magic at the moment. Dumbledore could do that, and a few of us can; it's just a question of how close you'd have to be."

"How could you track them if they weren't using magic?" asked Neville.

"Dark wizards have a particular frame of mind," explained Kingsley, "and even if they're not using magic at that moment, it's as though there's a constant, low-level use of

magic at all times. We all have that, actually, it's just much more noticeable with Dark wizards. When we have some more time, maybe over vacation, we should see if we can test that. Someone could walk around our facility, and we'd see if you could track them, with them sometimes doing magic and sometimes not doing it. Dawlish could do it, but Snape would be better, if he'd be willing."

"I'll talk to him about it," agreed Harry. He was interested to find out whether he could; he knew it could be very important to be able to see a Dark wizard coming even if they weren't using magic.

The next day was the day Harry was supposed to pick out the Slytherin Quidditch team. The new stadium was not completed, but the hoops were up, meaning teams could now practice. He met Thomas after lunch to make sure they both knew how the situation was to be presented: Harry and Thomas would be together as those trying out were put through their paces, but everyone would be told that Thomas would decide the team, and that Harry was simply there to tell the aspirants what they should do. Snape had agreed to Harry's request not to be known as the one picking the team. Harry felt that the second years, especially after taking flying lessons from Ron, were more likely to win positions, and he didn't want the second years or anyone else to think that favoritism had influenced his decision. Snape had rolled his eyes at Harry's request, but could find no reason to object. Thomas found it slightly mystifying, but didn't object either.

To Harry's surprise, not that many Slytherins tried out for the team; he wondered if their poor Quidditch performance during the Malfoy era had caused a decrease in enthusiasm for Quidditch in Slytherin. There were thirteen aspirants for six positions, six of whom were second years. Harry noted

that the six second years were trying out for different positions, so none would be in competition with another; he assumed they had worked it out among the ten of them before the tryouts.

Speaking alone again after the tryouts, Harry asked Thomas his opinion, mainly to see if it differed from his. "Well, I don't have that much experience, which is why you're choosing the team and not me, but I thought the second years were really good. A few positions were tossups, though." Harry agreed, and explained the desirability of choosing younger players. He was uncomfortable choosing six second years, because of his relationship with them, but he knew it was what he would do if it were his team, or even if he had no relationship with them.

Harry spent most of his free time the following week working on his Ring of Reduction, which was due for presentation the last Monday before Christmas vacation. He found that he was beginning to regret having chosen a four-room ring, as his mother had; it was a lot of work, and Hermione was the only one of his friends who had done so. He was both amused and amazed to hear her complain at one point that there couldn't be a nine-room Ring, and wondered whether she would really take on the task if she could. He decided she probably would.

On Friday afternoon, the first twenty minutes of Harry's seventh-year Defense Against the Dark Arts class was spent on the energy of love, after which everyone went outside for combat flying instruction. Harry had a good idea of how to teach it, from having talked to Kingsley and Ron, and from reading parts of a few books. It was their third lesson on the topic; the first two had been spent mostly on formation flying, and this one was the first in which they attempted spells while flying and maneuvering. Not surprisingly, those

with Quidditch experience did far better than those without it.

In addition to formation flying, he spent some time on one-on-one airborne duels, which Harry and Ron had also practiced over the past few Sundays. Harry illustrated the difference with normal dueling by asking Ron and Neville to have a few duels. To Neville's annoyance, Ron won all three duels due to his greater adeptness on a broom. Harry explained to the class that on the ground, Neville would beat Ron ninety-five times out of a hundred, but in the air, Ron had a strong natural advantage. Not only was he more maneuverable, but his greater flying experience allowed him to predict his opponent's movements more easily. Harry explained that he didn't expect everyone to become expert fliers by the end of the class, but that he wanted them to understand their strengths and weaknesses in any given situation.

As had become usual when they had class outside, Harry called a halt five minutes early to give the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors time to get to History of Magic. As was also usual, Harry fell in with his friends heading back to the castle. Walking next to Hermione, he remarked, "You're getting pretty good at flying."

Before she could answer, Ron said, "Of course she is, you made it part of the school curriculum. Did you expect her to do anything else?"

"It's not only because of that," responded Hermione casually. "The castle really could come under attack, and I want to be able to fly well. One reason I never bothered with flying was that there was never such a practical use for it; now there is. Anyway, I'm glad you think I'm doing well," she added, to Harry.

"I'm not going to ask you to comment on how I'm doing," said Neville. "I think we all just saw that for ourselves."

Harry couldn't tell if Neville was dispirited, or just poking fun at himself. "C'mon, Neville, Ron's been flying all his life. You can't expect to pick it up quite that fast."

Neville shrugged. "I know, I just expected to do better than I did. I thought I would win at least one." To Ron, he added, "You were moving around so much, I don't think anything I did ever touched you."

"Well, that was the idea," said Ron, sounding almost apologetic. "I had some practice with Harry, that'll get you good real fast. I mean, you're really good at dueling, and I'm good on a broom; Harry's both. Hard to imagine who could take him in a flying duel, come to think of it."

"Does Voldemort fly?" asked Pansy. "I mean, if he does, is he any good?"

"I think we don't know that," said Harry. "He probably hasn't flown for a while, hasn't needed to. But he got good at most everything important for a wizard, so it'd be hard to imagine that he didn't get good at flying."

"But is he even going to show up if there's an attack on Hogwarts?" wondered Pansy. "He'll know you'll be there, and he'll know he's in trouble if you get near him."

"Yes, but he does have that device," pointed out Harry, "so the worst that'll happen to him is that he goes unconscious and gets sent back to wherever his headquarters is; he can always come back when he wakes up. Which is why I've got to find the damn thing. Hermione, I don't suppose there's any spell that gets people's clothes off?"

She raised an eyebrow for a second. "In any other situation I'd assume you were joking, but I can see why you're asking. No, there isn't, not that I know of."

"Yes, but you wouldn't know, would you?" said Ron. "I mean, I know there are... adult spells, but I kind of doubt the library has books on that." Hermione glanced at Ron, then looked ahead again; Ron's eyebrows shot up. "It does? There are? You did?"

Harry could see Hermione trying not to look embarrassed, as she glanced around to make sure they weren't being overheard. "There are a couple, and yes, I looked through them a bit last year. I was just curious," she added defensively, giving Ron a look that warned him not to make fun of her. "They're in the Restricted section, of course. There's a section on Vanishing clothing and taking it off with magic, but nothing that gets it off all at once." As they walked, Ron gave her a look that suggested that he was interested in hearing more about what she'd read about. Rolling her eyes, she continued, "There's really nothing that interesting... well, okay, some of it is interesting, but not very useful; a lot of it was kind of strange stuff, that most people would never do. There was a section on Engorgement Charms, which shouldn't be a surprise, and a section on, um, creative uses of Polyjuice Potion."

Harry frowned, puzzled. "What would people do with... oh, you mean, they'd become someone else, so they could..."

She nodded, keeping her voice down as they approached the castle entrance. "Apparently there's quite a black market for hair from especially famous and attractive witches and wizards. I try not to judge, but some of those uses... one thing it said some couples do is make Polyjuice

Potion, using a hair from each so they can essentially become each other, and then..."

Harry cringed, and saw that he wasn't the only one to have a strong reaction. "Ewww," said Ron fervently. "Boy, I have no trouble judging that, that's just sick. And the scary thing is, I bet there was stuff even weirder than that."

"I got that impression, but I didn't read much further than that," said Hermione. "I decided I didn't need to know everything after all."

"Your quest for knowledge ran up against the limits of good taste," joked Pansy.

"Pretty much," agreed Hermione.

"I can understand that. Well, here's where I separate from you guys; the second years will want my account of the class, then we'll have our session. See you later."

As Pansy walked away, Neville called after her, "Tell them I put up a good fight."

"I will," she shouted over her shoulder. As the rest continued on in the direction of the History of Magic classroom, Harry wondered again whether Neville was actually upset.

Ron looked over at Hermione in puzzlement. "How can you say you don't judge that, anyway? It's so disgusting. And since when did you become Miss-I-Don't-Judge-Things?"

She didn't quite meet his eyes. "Since this summer," she said, sounding as though she was trying to keep emotion out of her voice. Ron looked abashed, clearly thinking he should have been able to predict her answer. "I remembered a phrase I'd heard a long time ago: 'Judge not, lest ye be

judged.' It seemed to have a certain... relevance to my situation." As they walked on in silence, Harry realized that while he hadn't thought about what Hermione had suffered over the summer for quite a while, she clearly had.

They arrived to History of Magic five minutes early; Harry noticed that there were six more people there than usual, all Ravenclaws. A few minutes later, Dentus walked in and greeted them. "Good afternoon, all. A reminder before we start: next Friday will be the last class before winter vacation, so your mid-term essays will be due at the beginning of that class." Harry again felt grateful that Dentus had not required him to do homework for the class; he couldn't imagine where he would have found the time to write an essay, never mind research it.

"You recall, I hope," continued Dentus humorously, "that for the last fifteen minutes of the last class, I gave you some background on the war which the Muggles refer to as World War II. As you know, certain wizarding historical events occur very independently of the situation in the Muggle world, while others are inextricably linked to it. What we will discuss today falls into the latter category.

"You may also recall that in the first lesson, Harry briefly mentioned that Professor Dumbledore had talked to him about the events of that period, events in which Professor Dumbledore was heavily involved. In that class, Harry said that he would speak to the class about those events at some point in the future; today will be that day. But before I turn the floor over to Harry... you may have noticed that we have a few extra people here today. I told the other seventh year class that Harry would be talking about this today, and some of them asked to sit in on this class. I agreed, as did Harry." Dentus gestured for Harry to come forward.

Harry got up and walked to near where Dentus was standing, a few feet to his left. "Harry, I have a question before you start. You said before that you were sure he wouldn't mind you talking about this. How are you so sure of that?"

Dentus had told Harry before the class that he would be asking that, so that the students could be sure that Harry wasn't violating Dumbledore's privacy. Harry had had enough time to prepare his answer. "I talked to him about this a lot, and I asked him if it was all right to talk to other people about it. He said yes, he didn't mind." Harry didn't add the detail that all of those conversations had occurred after Dumbledore died.

Harry turned to the class. "From what Albus told me... okay, wait. I should say before I continue that for some time before he died, he wanted me to call him 'Albus,' and I kind of got into the habit of doing it. So, I'm just going to use his name that way here, which I'm also sure he wouldn't mind."

He paused to remember what he was going to say, then continued. "Apparently Grindelwald started becoming well-known among the wizarding population around 1943, though he was well-known to the Aurors before then. I should say that Albus wasn't an Auror, but he had connections to them, and was friends with some of them. He didn't have a job; he had enough money, and he spent his time after graduating from Hogwarts traveling around the world, exposing himself to different cultures, different types of magic. Sometimes he would just travel through a country; sometimes he'd stay and help them find Dark wizards for a while, or if he found a wizard he could learn something from, stay and ask to be taught. The longest he stayed in any one place was one year, in Tibet. He studied more mysticism than magic there; he said it was the most important year of his life. He—yes, Hermione?"

"Did he say exactly why it was so important?" she asked.

"Kind of," replied Harry, "but not exactly in those words. They taught him about meditation, which was a big influence on him. He was already a fairly calm and peaceful person; what they taught him helped him strengthen that. It helped him with mental discipline, it helped him become the person he ended up being. Mandy?"

"You've said that he used the energy of love, he just didn't realize that was what it was. In the energy-of-love sections of our class, you've had us doing stuff that's a lot like meditation. Was there any connection between the time he spent there, and his using the energy of love?"

Good question, he thought. "I don't know; I'm not even sure that he would. It wouldn't be surprising, but he was already pretty powerful before he started traveling. I don't recall him saying that there was an increase in his power at any particular point.

"Anyway, he had planned on staying longer, but as the war continued, he felt that he should go back to England and help out. Not with the war itself, of course; as Professor Dentus has already explained, all countries' wizards stayed out of it. But the war created a really good environment for Dark wizards. You see, Dark wizards get off on killing people. It gives them a feeling of power, it sort of feeds their... negative energy, you could say. Normally, the number of people—right now, I mean Muggles—they kill isn't that high, because killing all the people they wanted would get them noticed, even by Muggles, and increase their chances of being captured. But in that war, people were constantly dying, and not just on the battlefield—lots of bombs were being dropped on cities, and lots of people were dying from that, too. In that kind of environment, it was a lot easier for

Dark wizards to do what they wanted to do. They could just go to the site of a bombing, kill one, or five, or ten people, and if they wanted to not attract attention, disfigure the bodies so it looked like bomb damage. The Muggles never knew. Albus understood that was what was going on, and that the wizarding community had to be more aggressive in hunting down Dark wizards who did that. The fact is, a lot of wizards didn't really care about it. As long as the Dark wizards were killing Muggles and not wizards, they figured, Muggles are dying by the thousands anyway because of their stupid war, why should we risk ourselves trying to protect them?"

Susan raised her hand. "Are you sure that most wizards were really like that? It seems really cold, a really awful attitude."

Harry looked at Dentus with an unspoken question. "I was a child, only seven years old at the time that Harry's talking about," said Dentus, "so I can't speak from personal experience, and I have no specific historical knowledge of that one way or the other. But from my experience as a Ministry undersecretary, I find it utterly believable. Much of the wizarding community, frankly, looks down on Muggles, considers them barely worthy of our notice. Also, in every kind of community, both wizard and Muggle, there is a strong tendency to 'look after one's own.' At such a time as Harry is talking about, there would have been great strains on the wizarding community, from living in a wartime environment. Food was relatively scarce, wizards were sometimes injured or killed by bombs, and so forth. I have no doubt that many wizards would have said, we'll look after our own first, and if we have any resources after that, maybe we'll help the Muggles." Dentus waited for follow-up questions, and seeing none, turned the floor back over to Harry.

"Albus, of course, didn't have that attitude," continued Harry, "and he went to work trying to catch Dark wizards who were feeding off the Muggles' misfortune. He found allies: some other wizards who felt like he did, and a few Muggles who knew about the wizarding world and kept their eyes open for deaths that looked suspicious. It wasn't easy to catch Dark wizards, of course, because they could just Apparate at will, and most were careful enough not to kill where there were too many witnesses."

Neville raised a hand. "What were the Aurors doing at the time?"

"Albus told me that their orders from the Ministry were to focus their attention on where wizards lived, especially places like Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. Some Aurors helped him and the others, in their free time.

"Hmmm, where was I... oh, yes, I was getting to Grindelwald. A lot of people assume that he was that generation's Voldemort, but Albus said that except for the fact that they both used Dark magic and liked killing people, they had almost nothing in common. Voldemort has an organization, and demands loyalty; Grindelwald worked alone. Voldemort craves power; Grindelwald didn't bother with power, at least not the kind that Voldemort wants. Voldemort likes to inspire fear and terror; Grindelwald found that irrelevant. He never would have done anything like the Dark Mark.

"What made Grindelwald the most feared Dark wizard of the time was his body count. He's thought to have killed hundreds of wizards, and thousands of Muggles, far more than Voldemort ever has. Now, I should say, another difference between him and Voldemort is that Voldemort is quite powerful, definitely the most powerful Dark wizard around, and nearly the most powerful wizard, period." Harry

tried not to smile as he saw his friends looking at him, greatly amused at what they knew he was thinking.

"Grindelwald wasn't an especially powerful wizard, he was above average at best. What made him dangerous was an artifact he had, one that wasn't known until shortly before he was defeated. It was a one-of-a-kind Dark artifact, a ring. If a wizard killed while wearing it, he got... a power boost, you could say. He absorbed some of the life energy of the person he killed. It made him more powerful, but for a limited time. Albus wasn't sure, but he thought it was about forty-eight hours. That was the reason he killed so much, besides the fact that he liked it: it kept him more powerful than he otherwise would have been."

The students looked spellbound, and Dentus raised both eyebrows. "Fascinating," he commented. "I'm quite familiar with this period, and I didn't know this. The information must have been very closely held."

Harry nodded. "Albus said that no more than a half dozen people knew it, and they all agreed that it was best kept a secret. They were afraid that if it became known, other Dark wizards might try to get the ring for themselves."

Ernie raised a hand. "So, what happened to the ring?"

Before Harry could answer, a smiling Justin said, "Getting ideas, are you?"

The class laughed, including Harry. Ernie rolled his eyes and looked over at Justin. "Yes, Justin, you know how I've always wanted to be a powerful Dark wizard. But now my secret is out, and it's all your fault."

Harry was surprised; he wasn't sure he'd ever heard Ernie make a joke like that, or any joke, for that matter. Looking a

bit surprised as well, Justin responded, "See, I knew the whole Head Boy thing was just an act."

"Well, to answer Ernie's question," said Harry, "or, I guess I should say, to not answer it... obviously I wouldn't tell you even if I knew, but I don't know, and Albus didn't know. It was given to one person at the Ministry, someone who all those who knew trusted; that person was to dispose of it. With the others' agreement, he gave them Memory Charms so they would forget about the existence of the ring in the first place."

Harry paused to take a breath, but Ernie's hand shot up. "Um, Harry... the obvious question here is, if Dumbledore was given a Memory Charm to cover this up, then how did he know enough to tell you this?"

Harry paused, kicking himself mentally for not having seen the question coming; it was, in fact, obvious. He wondered whether telling twenty people would be enough for the secret to get out, then made an impulsive decision. "The answer to that is something I'd really rather wasn't commonly known. Do you all think you can keep it to yourselves if I tell you?"

Most students looked eager to know, and Harry saw surprised looks on Neville, Ron, and Hermione's faces. "As long as we don't have to sign a piece of parchment saying we will," muttered a dark-haired Ravenclaw named Lisa Turpin, sitting at the back of the room.

A hush fell. Harry looked over at Hermione, who looked down, obviously embarrassed. Harry took a step forward. "Lisa, if you'd rather not be here, you're welcome to leave," he said coldly.

She glared at him in response. "Marietta's my friend. Besides, you're not the teacher of this class."

Without missing a beat, Dentus replied, "Quite right; I am. Please leave, Miss Turpin." Looking slightly surprised, Turpin looked at Dentus, who stared back, expressionless. She picked up her bag and left the room. Harry was surprised as well; he assumed Dentus had dismissed her for her disrespect to Harry, who was a Hogwarts teacher, even if not the teacher of that class. Harry wasn't sure whether Dentus knew about the incident with Marietta, or that it involved Hermione.

Harry was about to speak again, but Hermione did first. Turning to the remaining five Ravenclaws, she said quietly, "Look, not that it's any of Lisa's business, or yours, but I sent Marietta an owl in August, apologizing for what I did. A lot of people in this class signed that, and I should have told you what you were signing."

Padma shook her head. "Don't worry, Hermione. This is a Lisa thing, not a Ravenclaw thing. Remember, I was one of the ones Marietta almost got in serious trouble, if not for what Dumbledore did. You were trying to protect us, and I don't blame you for a minute for what happened." Hermione nodded gratefully, but didn't look as though she felt much better about what had happened.

Harry decided he should resume his story, though he knew now he wouldn't tell them what he'd intended to; he was no longer in a frame of mind where he felt comfortable trusting twenty people to keep a potentially embarrassing secret. "Okay, getting back to the story. Until Grindelwald was caught, nobody knew about the ring, so everyone assumed he was just a very powerful wizard who really liked to kill lots of people. He killed more Muggles than wizards; he

would rather have killed wizards, but killing wizards was much riskier, because the Aurors were spending all their time making sure wizards were safe, and because wizards could possibly fight back in a way Muggles couldn't. Grindelwald preferred to kill wizards because they gave him more power; killing wizards gave him three or four times as much power as killing Muggles did. He still did it, just very carefully.

"They had a very hard time with Grindelwald, because he didn't care about anything but killing. With Voldemort... well, look at what happened with me. All I did was say his name, and encourage others to do it. He could have just ignored me, and he'd be much farther along in his plans by now. But he keeps trying to kill me, and he keeps putting more and more effort into—" He stopped talking as he saw a hand go up. "Dean?"

"Yes, but he thought he'd be able to kill you easily," pointed out Dean. "He didn't know it would be this hard; this wasn't part of his plan."

"Yes, but that's part of my point exactly," said Harry. "He failed, and was unhappy that he failed, because whenever he tried to kill someone before, they ended up dead. The fact that I'm still alive really annoys him, and not just because I'm now a threat to him, but because it's a blow to his ego, power, and status—it makes him look bad that he can't kill me, and so he keeps trying. He has a need to be seen a certain way. Grindelwald, on the other hand, wouldn't have let himself get sidetracked like that. Albus could have called him every name in the book in the Prophet, and Grindelwald would have just ignored it, and kept on killing. It's harder to beat an opponent who's distracted by fewer things.

"Albus spent most of 1944 trying to protect Muggles and hunt down Dark wizards, not just Grindelwald. He tried to help Muggles where he could, but he knew there was only so much he could do, and it pained him not to be able to do more for them, when there was so much suffering all around him." Dean raised his hand again, and Harry called on him.

"Yes, a question for Professor Dentus... you said last week that tens of millions were killed around that time; that Russia killed millions of its own people, and Germany killed millions of Jewish people. I assume the reason that wizards didn't try to stop that is that we're not supposed to get involved in Muggle affairs, and Harry, is that what you meant when you said 'there was only so much he could do?'"

Dentus responded first. "Yes, though it was talked about. Hitler's plans for the Jews were known to Ministry wizards, and high-ranking wizards in America and some European countries, well before most Muggles were aware of it. Doing something to intervene was discussed, but the only real way to do anything would have been to remove or manipulate Hitler, and no one was willing to interfere in Muggle affairs so directly, for reasons you already know. Even hardheaded wizards hated to see so much death, but it was decided at an international wizarding conference that even at such a cost, staying out of Muggle affairs was more important than ever. If we intervened, we would essentially be taking over, and no one wanted that. Harry?"

Looking at Dean, Harry said, "Yes, that was what he meant. He agreed with the decision; he knew it would be bad for wizards to take over. It was just very hard for him. He saw so much death, and if I know one thing from knowing him, it's that it pained him greatly to see people suffer, to know what the families of the dead went through. He did sometimes intervene in small ways, saving Muggle lives when he could

and when it wouldn't be noticed by too many people, giving those he saved Memory Charms if he had to use magic to do it, which he usually did. He was reprimanded once by the Ministry after a wizard happened to see him doing that, but he continued anyway. But yes, he knew there was only so much he could do.

"In 1944, he came close to catching Grindelwald a few times. By late 1944, the Allies were winning the war, and most of the action was in continental Europe. Grindelwald went there, and so did many Dark wizards, so they would have more opportunities to kill. Albus went there as well, along with the people he had been working with in England. Obviously, he didn't care about the nationality of the people he saved. Twice in late 1944 he got very close to Grindelwald, but Grindelwald Disapparated before Albus could get close enough to do anything to him. Yes, Mandy?"

"How did Professor Dumbledore find him? I mean, was it luck, or eyewitnesses, or what?"

"It was partly luck, and partly his ability to sense Dark wizards. Some wizards—and Aurors are trained in this—have the ability to sense Dark magic being used somewhere near them. That was how he captured a lot of the Dark wizards he did—he would go to where there was a bombing, some place likely for Dark wizards to go, and if there was one close enough, he could sense them. He'd usually capture them if he could get close enough to them so he could put down an anti-Disapparation field before they were aware of him. The times he missed Grindelwald it was because Grindelwald happened to Disapparate before Albus could get close enough to him to put down the field, not because he saw Albus coming."

Justin raised a hand. "Can you sense Dark wizards?"

Harry paused for a few seconds, trying to figure out whether that was a security matter or not; he wasn't sure how aware Voldemort was of his ability. "Well, yes, I'm getting a very strong sense from Ernie right here," he joked, gesturing to Ernie. After the laughter died down, Harry spoke to the class again. "Seriously, though, I'm going to not answer that question. If I do have that ability, I'd rather he found out the hard way. And if I don't, I'd rather he worried that I did.

"To continue... in early 1945, Albus got close enough to put down an anti-Disapparation field onto him, but as soon as he saw Albus, Grindelwald Disapparated, defeating Albus's field. Albus was discouraged, since this was to him proof that Grindelwald was a stronger wizard than he was, and Albus was one of the strongest wizards of his generation.

"Even though Albus kept getting closer to him, Grindelwald kept doing what he'd been doing, he didn't change his habits. He assumed that no one wizard was a threat to him, and he knew that Albus wasn't looking for him specifically, just for Dark wizards killing Muggles unobtrusively. Yes, Anthony?"

"How do you know what Grindelwald thought?"

Harry nodded. "Good question; it'll be answered naturally in the course of the story. So... about a month later, in March 1945, as the war was starting to wind down, Albus got as close to Grindelwald as he ever had. He was able to sneak up on him and Stun him, then he did the spell that wraps the person in ropes after taking his wand. Right at this point, Muggles started showing up. Normally, Albus would have Apparated them both directly to Auror headquarters in England, but he knew it would be a major violation of wizarding secrecy to do that right then. He quickly

Disillusioned Grindelwald, so the Muggles couldn't see him, and he levitated him away, at his side.

"While he took Grindelwald to a place where they couldn't be seen, he did Legilimens on him. He started calling up memories, which answers your question, Anthony. He got a lot of information in a few minutes, including about the ring. As they approached a place where Albus could Apparate him away, Grindelwald woke up. Albus didn't notice for a few seconds, and that was all Grindelwald needed. Albus still doesn't know how, but Grindelwald broke out of the ropes; Albus assumed afterwards that he had a second wand somewhere that he was able to reach somehow, or even just touch. Before Albus had a chance to do anything, Grindelwald Disapparated.

"Albus felt horrible, of course. He blamed himself, figured he'd been careless. All he could think about for the next few weeks, the next month, was how many people would be killed because of his mistake. Ernie?"

"Why didn't he just kill Grindelwald when he had the chance?"

Harry nodded grimly. "Albus said that everyone he talked to who knew what happened asked him that question. Killing Dark wizards wasn't uncommon at that time, I should point out. These days, Aurors need special permission to do it, permission that was last given about seventeen years ago, when Voldemort was strong before. But then, an Auror could do it and not be questioned. Albus wasn't an Auror, but he had friends who were, and he knew full well that if he carried Grindelwald's dead body into the Ministry, no one would do anything but applaud.

"But the answer to your question, Ernie, is very simple: he thought killing was wrong, and he wouldn't do it. People argued with him about it later; they said, 'how can it be wrong to kill someone who's killed hundreds, maybe thousands?' Albus's answer was that if something was wrong, it was wrong in all situations, especially killing. He said that he should have been more careful, that he should have triple-checked that Grindelwald was unconscious at all times. What happened didn't become public knowledge, fortunately for him, but the Aurors and those who knew him fairly well knew about it. He spent a lot of his time over the next few months thinking about it, trying to decide whether he'd done the right thing.

"What didn't help was another bit of information he'd gotten from Grindelwald when he did Legilimens on him. It wasn't only finding out about the ring, about how he got power from it. Albus discovered that the power Grindelwald got from the ring was addictive. It had an effect on Grindelwald's power, but also his mood. He felt really good right after he killed someone, and if he went a few days without killing anyone, he felt worse than he normally did before he started using the ring. As the war went on, and he killed more and more, he became more and more addicted; he needed to kill more often to get the same feeling. So, after Albus captured Grindelwald and Grindelwald escaped, Albus knew he would continue killing, and do it more and more frequently. It was a huge burden on his conscience; he estimated that Grindelwald killed as much as two or three times a day, and at the end of every day, he would wonder who those people were, imagine their faces..." Harry paused as he felt emotion well up, and waited for it to pass.

"It was an enormous weight on him; he felt worse than he had in his life. He went from focusing on helping Muggles to focusing on catching Grindelwald, and he thought about

what he would do differently the next time. He still helped Muggles, of course, it's just that catching Grindelwald was now his main intention. He told himself it was to help the people that Grindelwald would surely kill, but it wasn't until much later that he realized it was more to help his own conscience deal with what had happened. He replayed Grindelwald getting away a hundred times in his head, and started to rethink his refusal to kill. He wondered if it was just an indulgence, so he wouldn't have to feel bad at having killed, while because of him, he felt, more people were being killed every day. Did it matter that he wasn't the one doing the actual killing, he wondered, so long as people were being killed, and he could have prevented it?" As he spoke, Harry flashed back to Snape saying roughly the same words to him the day after Skeeter was killed.

"The war ended in May, at least, the war in Europe. Albus wondered if Grindelwald would go to Japan, where many people were dying in bombings, but he didn't. Albus guessed that Grindelwald would have felt too conspicuous, a white person in a country filled with Asians. There was a sighting of Grindelwald in England in early June, then Albus came back as well. As the summer passed, it was clear that Grindelwald was still killing. His killing of Muggles was now very conspicuous, and he also killed wizards, about once a week. He was very careful about how he did it, but Albus was sure he would be caught eventually; the question was, how many people would die before he was.

"Albus still couldn't decide what he would do the next time he faced Grindelwald. He talked to people, all of whom urged him to kill Grindelwald if he had a chance. He visited the wizards in Tibet for a few days, and asked them for their advice. They refused to give him specific advice; they just told him to do what he thought was the right thing to do. It didn't help him much, since he felt in a way that both of his

choices were wrong, and it was a matter of choosing what he felt was least wrong. He returned to England, not feeling any better about the choice he had to make. In the meantime, people kept dying, including two acquaintances and a friend. That made him angry, and in August, he decided that he would kill Grindelwald if he could. Not out of revenge for his friend's death, but just because it brought home to him all the more how much suffering Grindelwald was causing; it made him feel other people's pain even more than he had before.

"Finally, in September, he got his chance. Grindelwald, in his addiction, his need to kill, was becoming less careful. Albus found him in Diagon Alley, in a shop that had closed. Grindelwald had just killed the shopkeeper. Albus got to a line of sight, hoping he'd get there before Grindelwald Disapparated. He did, and summoning up as much hate as he could, did the Killing Curse. Grindelwald was dead; Albus took off the ring, and took the body to Auror headquarters.

"Well, as you can probably imagine, it made him a hero. Grindelwald's killing of so many wizards was a big issue in the wizarding world, and people were really relieved that he was gone. Albus was on the cover of the Prophet for the next week, lots of articles were written about his life. He was given the Order of Merlin, First Class, and treated with great respect by, ironically, the same high Ministry officials who had reprimanded him for using magic to try to save Muggles. He was offered a high position in the Ministry; the Aurors, who had wanted him to join them before, tried harder than ever to get him to join. He couldn't go anywhere without people stopping and talking to him, thanking him, praising him. It was almost impossible for him to pay for a meal for quite a while.

"You would think that he would be really happy, and he would have thought so too. But he wasn't. He was pleased that Grindelwald was no longer a threat, but other than that, he felt depressed. He put on a smile in public, accepting people's praise and thanks with as much grace as he could, but he was very unhappy. He knew that the reason was that he had killed, and he spent a long time trying to justify it to himself. He told a few close friends how he felt, and they told him the same things he was telling himself; it still didn't do any good.

"One thing that was happening at the same time was that his magical ability suddenly dropped quite a bit. He suddenly couldn't do some difficult spells he had done before, and the effectiveness of all his spells went down very noticeably. Combined with his mood, it put him in a very bad state, and he spent weeks not doing much, wondering what was happening. He had lots of ideas about why it was, but no way to know for sure. The one that he kept coming back to was that this was a message from whatever higher power existed that what he had done was wrong, that what he thought in the first place had been right-killing was wrong, no matter what."

Lavender raised her hand. "He believed in a higher power?"

"I'm not sure exactly what he believed at that time, but I think he did then, and I know he did when he died," answered Harry. "Anyway-yes, Mandy?"

"You've said he was using the energy of love, and he just didn't realize it. What you described happening to his magic after he killed Grindelwald sounds like a change from energy-of-love magic to average magic, and you've told us in classes that it's important not to have negative, hateful

thoughts. Did using the Killing Curse cause him to lose the ability to use the energy of love?"

Harry nodded, impressed. "I guess this is why the Sorting Hat is always saying that the Ravenclaws are smart. We can't know it, of course, but yes, he thinks that's exactly what happened, and it makes perfect sense. Intuitively, I think it must be the case."

"I have another question about that, but a short one first," continued Mandy. "That's the second time you've referred to Professor Dumbledore in the present tense, and I was just wondering why, if there was any reason."

Harry's eyebrows went up; he hadn't noticed. He was thinking of a way to answer when Dentus spoke. "It's not uncommon for people who have lost a loved one to do that. Those of you who read the Prophet regularly know that my wife passed away four months ago, and I find myself referring to her that way. I think it's partly that they were so close to us that we feel as though they're around even if they're not, and partly that my wife and I both believe that we continue to exist in some way after we pass on, in which case she isn't truly gone, just in a different place. I believe that Harry feels that way about Professor Dumbledore."

Harry nodded, grateful for Dentus's intervention and surprised at his having said something as personal as that. "I hadn't even realized I was doing it," he said to Mandy truthfully. "But yes, I'm confident that he's around somewhere. What was your other question?"

Harry guessed that she was surprised by his and Dentus's comments, as she took a few seconds to recall what she had been about to ask. "Does what happened to him mean that you can't kill Voldemort?"

That's the question, isn't it, thought Harry. "No, it just means that if I did, what happened to him would very likely happen to me; I would lose the ability to use the energy of love. Not permanently, though, since it wasn't that way for him."

"Yes," she said, "but suppose you tried to kill him, and failed; you would lose the ability to use the energy of love. That spell you now have, the one that can make him unconscious... you haven't given any details about it, but it has to be an energy-of-love spell. Can you really afford to take that chance? If you have the chance, will you try to kill him?"

The class was rapt, hanging on his next words; Harry thought for a few seconds before answering. "I'd be lying, Mandy, if I said I hadn't thought about that... a few dozen times. Normally, I wouldn't answer this question, since I don't want any information about my intentions to get back to him. But the truthful answer is also one that's not going to help him if it gets back to him: When the situation happens, I'll know what to do. I absolutely believe that. Albus told me many times to trust my intuition, and I'm comfortable doing that by now.

"Okay, getting back to Albus... he didn't feel any better after a couple of months, and he decided to go to Tibet again and talk to the wizards he'd come to trust. At first, they didn't seem to be of much help; they just told him that this was something he had to go through. He stayed for a week, meditated, had conversations with the wizards there, and he started to understand some things. One was that there are costs to taking a human life, no matter for what reason. He asked them if they thought what he did was wrong; they told him that that was something he had to decide for himself. At one point, he said to one of them that he did what he thought was right. The wizard shook his head and

said, 'You did what you thought was best, not what you thought was right.' That particular comment had a strong influence on Albus; he hadn't thought of what happened in quite that way, but he knew it was true. Nothing he was able to do, or say to himself, or have someone say to him was enough to make him comfortable with what he'd done. He went back to England, and mostly stayed out of sight; he was having a hard time dealing with people congratulating him for doing what he had done. He knew that most people in his position would accept what they'd done as necessary, and not think too much about it. He wished he could, but he couldn't.

"After thinking and agonizing for a few more months, he reached some conclusions. One of the things that the Tibetan wizards had told him was that 'feelings are the language of the soul,' and he decided that it was very true for him. His feelings were shouting at him, and he decided to listen to them. He decided never to take another life, no matter what the circumstances, even if doing so could save a hundred people. He visualized what he wanted the world to be like, and decided to act in the way that he felt the world would be a better place if everyone acted that way. He knew that the world was not that way then, nor would it be anytime in his lifetime, but the only way it ever could be was if people started acting as though it was. He decided never to lie, never to do anything by which he gained at someone else's expense. He also felt during this time that he truly understood for the first time why he'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff. He had qualities that could have put him into Ravenclaw or Gryffindor, but he came to feel that the values that Hufflepuff represented were exactly those that he was starting to embrace very strongly: treating people fairly, doing one's best. Hufflepuff wasn't seen as an attractive House to be put into; everyone can see the appeal of being smart, or brave, or ambitious. But he felt that Hufflepuff

values were the ones that, if everyone followed them, the world would be a much better place. Of course," added Harry with a small smile, "he couldn't really say that as headmaster, he had to be fair to all the Houses. But it was what he thought." Harry looked around to see the Hufflepuffs exchange glances; he thought Ernie looked particularly proud.

Susan raised a hand. "How did he justify to himself the idea that he wouldn't kill even to save a hundred lives? I mean, what made him decide to kill in the first place was that he had to stop people from dying. Did he decide he'd been wrong about that?"

Harry thought for a few seconds. "I think you could say he decided that it was wrong for him. He was still pained at the idea that people could die as a result of his failing to kill someone, but he just decided that he always had to do what he thought was the right thing, the thing that would create the world he wanted if everyone did it. He felt that the more people did that, the faster the world would become that place."

"But, really, he knew it wouldn't work that way, didn't he?" asked Mandy. "I mean, he was only one person, though a very important one. He couldn't change the world, he had to know that."

"No, he personally couldn't," agreed Harry. "But he felt that we all play a part, we all contribute to making the world what it is; he wanted to do his part to make the world how he wanted it, even though it was only a tiny nudge in that direction. He felt that it would be worth it even if he'd influenced no one else, though of course he did. Last year, I was lucky enough to get to spend a lot of time with him, and just the way he was... I always felt like, I'd really like to be

like he is. I didn't think I ever could, but it felt like it was a good goal to have. I'm sure that I wasn't the only one who felt that way, and I really believe that the reason he inspired that kind of feeling was that he always did what he thought was right, that he put himself so strongly on that kind of path. And it wasn't easy; it takes a lot of strength of character to live the way he did, in the position that he was in."

"How do you mean?" asked Susan.

"Well, for example, how he dealt with Malfoy last year. Especially after Goyle's attempt on my life in January, Albus knew that Malfoy would at some point try to kill me. Albus... loved me, he cared about me a great deal. He could have expelled Malfoy without cause, to protect me, and those of my friends who got in Malfoy's way. But he didn't, because his principles told him that it was wrong to expel any student without a proper and defensible justification. If it was done to Malfoy, it could be done to someone else in the future, for less valid reasons. Upholding the principle meant letting Malfoy stay, and risking the life of someone he loved. It pained him to do it, but he did it. As you all know, Malfoy ended up trying to kill me, and tortured Ginny, and Pansy really badly. Albus suffered for all that, felt responsible. If he was callous and indifferent, it would've been easy for him to do what he did. But he wasn't, and it wasn't. Most people wouldn't have done what he did. The more you love and care, the harder it is, and he loved and cared a lot. You all remember the speech he gave when Cedric was killed, about doing the easy and wrong thing versus the difficult and right thing; he lived that. Sometimes it was really hard, but what he went through with Grindelwald convinced him that it was the way he had to be."

"You've said that he was a big influence on you," said Hannah. "Are you... I'm sorry, this is kind of personal, I'll understand if you don't want to answer it, but are you going to try to be like he was about this?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. But I don't think I could. If I think about whether I could accept risk to Ginny, or Pansy, or... any of them, and the answer is, no way, I couldn't; I would do whatever I had to, to protect them. I mean, I have enough..." He paused and chuckled inwardly, thinking of what an understatement it was. "...enough trouble dealing with the danger that they're in, that anyone's in, just from being around me." He glanced at Dentus involuntarily as he spoke. "I should say, though, that he never told me that I should be like that. He said several times that I had to make my own decisions, do what I was comfortable with. He supported decisions I made, like supporting the ARA, even when it wasn't what he would have done. He said that we learn by making our own decisions, like he did. If somebody makes your decisions for you all your life, then you never learn or grow. So, I may end up like he was; I don't know. I just don't think I can ever do what he did, and he says... sorry, he would say that that was fine, that I have to be who I am, that we all do. If we do the best we can, then that's all we can do."

Dentus took a few steps toward Harry and addressed the class. "From your expressions, I can see that you feel as I do, that what we heard was... quite riveting. I should say that I was fortunate to consider Professor Dumbledore a friend, but I did not know most of what Harry just told us. Does anyone have any comment on its relevance from a historical point of view?"

Hermione raised her hand, despite Dentus's earlier suggestion that she not; Harry assumed that it was because

Dentus had asked for commentary, rather than a correct answer to a question. No other hands went up, and Dentus gestured to her. "It tells us what he was thinking, why he did what he did, and the extent to which what he did reflected the values of the society of the time," she said. "In this case, I would say he was quite far ahead of his time, and because he was a prominent person, he had a strong influence. Key people move their societies in their direction, some a little, some a lot. Some people are a reflection of their society, serving as a focal point for all the influences of their society. Some stand outside it, either pushing for change, or quietly leading and inviting others to join them, which Professor Dumbledore did."

"Yes, that's a very good point, Hermione," agreed Dentus. "Having worked for the Ministry—an organization which one could say can be 'ethically challenged'—I can say that Albus was greatly respected there, and that many of those who joined Minister Fudge's crusade against him and Harry two years ago at least were somewhat ashamed of it, which is uncommon for politicians. Yes, Mandy?"

"It occurred to me that he had another kind of influence, a more indirect one. He understood, somehow, that love was Voldemort's weakness, and he told Harry how to fight him. Harry would never have come up with the energy of love if not for Dumbledore, and Dumbledore wouldn't have been able to work that out if he hadn't been the kind of person he was. So, it was very interesting to find out what made him become who he was, and see what kind of decisions he made along the way. Especially because the decisions were so... wrenching."

"Another good point," said Dentus. "It also ties in with Hermione's, in a way. His natural tendency was to do things outside of what his society approved of, such as his

determination to help Muggles, even those not being threatened by Dark wizards. The action which secured his fame and influence, and of which his society heartily approved, ironically, was the thing he later decided was wrong. This is one of the lessons of history, of paying attention to more than the names and dates. People are normally rewarded by doing that which their society approves of, and thus gain fame and influence; politicians are the most common example of this. Most people who gain fame and influence like it sufficiently that they seek to gain more, and so make conscious efforts to do what others would want them to do, and gain more approval. In a sense, this is a waste of the influence a person has, since you don't really change a society by telling it the things it wants to hear. Professor Dumbledore simply did what he thought was right, and so while losing political influence, gained moral influence among those who admired him, such as myself and Harry, among many others."

Still standing in front of the class, Harry nodded. "It's funny, I never thought of his influence as having come from defeating Grindelwald, since it happened so many years ago. I was just very impressed by him personally, who he was, regardless of his being headmaster. Of course, I might not have known him if he hadn't been the headmaster, and he wouldn't have been the headmaster, maybe, if he hadn't killed Grindelwald. But..." He trailed off as he felt a vague feeling of unease, very faint and fleeting. After a few more seconds in which he felt nothing, he said, "Sorry. I was going to say, we all meet people who have an influence on us, and most of them aren't famous. For example, for me, Ron and Ginny's parents are..." He paused again as the feeling came back, more strongly this time; horror filled him as he realized what it was.

He stepped forward, to the area where Hermione, Ron, and Neville were sitting. "Someone's using powerful Dark magic," he said urgently. "Not close by, but somewhere in Hogwarts. Really strong."

His friends looked startled, as did the rest of the class. "Are you sure?" asked Ron.

"Oh, yeah, really sure," affirmed Harry. "If I had to guess, I'd say it was the Killing Curse. Hermione—" He cut himself off as someone started to open the classroom door. "No! Don't open the door! They'll be looking for me, they'll know where I am. The door will be our warning if they get close. Hermione, look at the map."

She quickly pulled out her map, activated it, and spread it on her desk as the other students watched in surprise. She scanned it, then said to Harry, "There's no one here who's not supposed to be." To the map, she said, "Changes, five minutes!" The map cleared itself, except for some blinking purple dots and names. She looked at Harry, fear in her eyes. "Almost a dozen Slytherins who were in their common room aren't on the map anymore. I think... they must be dead."

"Oh, God," muttered Harry, realizing that what he had sensed was multiple Killing Curses; he fought back emotion and tried to concentrate. Ron leaped out of his chair, standing next to Harry and looking down at Hermione's desk. Harry glanced at Ron and immediately knew what he was thinking. "Pansy?" he asked Hermione, as he grabbed his pendant. "Pink!" he shouted, as Ron did the same.

"Pansy!" shouted Ron. "Are you there?"

"She's there, she's alive," reported Hermione after she had the map resume its usual functioning. On his pendant and

Ron's, Pansy didn't respond, but Harry could hear screams.

He and Ron exchanged a terrified glance. As Ron started to say, "We've got to-", Harry put a hand on Ron's shoulder and Apparated them both to the Slytherin common room. To his shock, he was instantly standing in the middle of a roaring fire. He had barely registered this fact when he unconsciously activated his area-effect fire-suppression spell, and just as suddenly, the fire was out.

The screams stopped, and Harry looked around. A few dozen people were on the floor, coughing and gasping. Ron found Pansy and pulled her to her feet; Harry saw that all of the second years were there. Thank God none were killed, thought Harry quickly. "Are you all right?" asked Ron.

Pansy nodded. "Five of them, Harry, they must be here for you. They threw a fireball at us and left, but not before..." She gestured to the chairs and sofas in the middle of the room, where a number of students were slumped over, clearly dead.

Again, Harry tried to push it out of his mind. "They'll be heading for the History of Magic classroom, I have to go back there. Ron, use Fawkes and get Madam Pomfrey in here," he said as Fawkes appeared.

"I'm going with you," said Pansy, as Harry and Ron stared in surprise. "Really, I'm all right," she insisted, though the effect was diminished by a cough at the end of the sentence, and her severely singed blonde hair.

Harry would have preferred that she get medical care, but he saw her determination, and he knew he would do the same thing in her place. "All right." He put a hand on her shoulder and Disapparated.

They were back in the History of Magic classroom; there was a mild gasp at Pansy's sudden presence and appearance. "Still nothing on the maps?" Harry asked Hermione. She shook her head, clearly mystified that no attackers were showing up. "All right. Pansy—"

He was interrupted by his pendant vibrating in the way that indicated a call from Snape. "Yes, Professor?"

"Professor Potter," came Snape's voice, "you must report to Auror headquarters immediately and remain there until further notice."

"Just as soon as these attackers are dealt with, I promise," responded Harry with mild sarcasm. He knew that Snape was trying to protect him, and had hoped that Harry didn't yet know about the attack and would do as he was told.

Harry heard Snape sigh, and wondered whether he was imagining it. "The headmistress's instructions—"

"The headmistress knows I'm not going anywhere until these people are caught."

"The Dark Lord will expect that you will remain. His operatives will—"

"Be caught, one by one," interrupted Harry. "Now, please be quiet. Pansy, what happened?" Harry left the pendant channel open so Snape could listen if he wanted to.

"I was in the second year boys dormitory with all ten, we were having a session," she reported. "We heard screams from the common room, and we ran in. Five wizards were using Killing Curses, you saw the bodies. Helen, Sylvia, and I started putting up shields, and everyone else started throwing spells at them. I saw two of them heading for the

portrait, and one of them threw the fireball at us. It exploded, and you got there a few seconds later, I think." Harry had heard of fireballs, but had never seen the effects of one so closely until then; he thought of them as the wizarding world's equivalent of hand grenades, though much worse.

"Okay, we have to start getting everyone out of here, hopefully before they get here," said Harry. "Hermione, if you could have Flora start--"

Flora suddenly appeared. "Where should she take them?" asked Hermione.

"If you say 'Auror headquarters,' I'm not going," said Justin. "It has to be somewhere in Hogwarts."

Harry hesitated, as Justin had correctly predicted what Harry would say. "Okay, their common rooms," he said to Hermione. "There should be at least one person in every common room who can do the spells. Hermione, work it out. Everyone, when you get to your common room, tell everyone what happened, make sure no one leaves. Watch the portrait holes, be ready. I don't think passwords are going to stop--"

Harry interrupted himself as he got the sense of Dark magic in the vicinity; nearby, but at a low level, so he assumed that the person wasn't using magic. As Flora took two Ravenclaws away, he tried to localize it, and found that it was almost right outside the door. "Neville," he whispered, "open the door when I do this." He made a gesture with his left hand; Neville nodded. Harry walked over to the door, stood against the wall, then made the gesture. The door flew open, and Harry immediately sent out intense feelings of love, hoping they would connect with their target. A man wearing short black robes and a black scarf around most of

his face walked in, taking off his scarf as he did so. He appeared to be in his late twenties, shorter than average, with black hair and a thick half-day growth of beard. Harry infused him with the feeling that Harry's safety was of urgent importance. The man spoke, but Harry didn't understand any of it. "Damn," he muttered.

Dentus pointed a wand at the man. "Lexicus," he said. To Harry, he added, "Translation spell." Harry nodded his thanks.

The man spoke again; this time, Harry heard him in English. "There are four others," the man said quickly, handing Harry his wand. "I think they headed back to the Slytherin area as soon as you went there; I didn't look at my tracking device until just before you came back here. They will be heading here soon." As he spoke, he reached inside his robes and took out wands, eventually handing over three more. Flora took away two more Ravenclaws as Ron appeared with Fawkes; Harry silently asked Fawkes to take two Hufflepuffs back to their common room.

"Madam Pomfrey is with the Slytherins, they'll be okay," reported Ron, looking quizzically at the attacker but seeming to understand the situation.

Harry nodded, then turned back to the attacker. "You can track me? How?"

"Your blood is the Dark Lord's blood."

Harry rolled his eyes. "That's starting to get pretty inconvenient. I assume your instructions are to kill me? Anything else?"

"You are the first priority, then the other five, then the three newest." Harry raised his eyebrows and glanced at the

others at the reference to Luna, Helen, and Sylvia. "We were also to dispatch anyone who got in our way, including the inhabitants of the Slytherin common room."

"Professor Snape, are you getting this?" asked Harry.

"Yes," came Snape's reply. "Aurors have begun to arrive; other professors and I are with them at the castle entrance."

"I'm sending Ron and Pansy to join you," he said, glancing up at Ron and Pansy, to whom he said, "I know you'd rather be with me, but I need to be mobile. I can only travel with one person, and that's going to be Neville." He knew the others would understand that he wanted Neville's dueling ability if for whatever reason the Imperius Charm wasn't effective.

"Acknowledged," said Snape. Fawkes returned from transporting the most recent pair of Hufflepuffs; Ron and Pansy took hold of his tail, and were gone. Harry turned his attention to the captured attacker.

"Voldemort must know about the Imperius Charm. Why did he send you anyway, knowing I could just do this?"

"The Dark Lord believes that there is no such thing as the Imperius Charm, and that you simply used the Imperius Curse and called it something else so you would not have to answer for having used one of the Unforgivable Curses."

"The Dark Lord is an unbelievable moron," muttered Harry, oblivious to the amazed looks that all the remaining students except for Hermione and Neville were wearing.

"We are all expert in resisting the Imperius Curse, which he thought would be more than sufficient," the man went on.

"In addition, I am wearing an artifact, a ring which shields one from all spells affecting the brain except Legilimency."

"I don't see any ring," said Harry.

"It is invisible when worn," the man explained.

"Give it to me," instructed Harry. The man took something off a finger, and a simple gold band became visible. Harry took it and put it on, and it became invisible again. He sensed low-level Dark magic drawing nearer; he knew he might have to leave, but didn't know how long his Imperius Charm hold on the man would continue if he did. "If I wrap you up, will you be able to escape?"

"Now that I have given you my extra wands, no," said the man.

Harry nodded. "I'd like to talk more, but the others are coming," he said as he performed the spell that wrapped the man in ropes. He touched the man and Disapparated, appearing in the detection room at Auror headquarters. An Auror ran over to take the man from Harry. "Others will be on the way," said Harry, who then Disapparated, now finding himself back in the History of Magic classroom. The evacuation was almost finished; the only people remaining were Hermione, Neville, and Dentus. "All the common rooms covered?" Harry asked Hermione.

"All except Hufflepuff," she said. "I'll go there."

He nodded. "Take Archibald to the Slytherin common room. Ready, Neville?"

"Any time you are."

Harry sensed that two attackers were very near the door now. He wasn't sure exactly where the other two were, but he knew they were on a lower level of the castle. He touched Neville's shoulder, and they were outside, on the roof of the castle. "I came here because I need a minute to concentrate, to get a more accurate idea of where they are."

"I'll help out by not disturbing you," joked Neville.

Harry smiled. "Thanks, I appreciate that." He closed his eyes and focused, and opened them a minute later. "The two that were almost outside the classroom are heading upwards, but they're nowhere near where I want to go, which is the important thing." He touched Neville, and they were outside the Room of Requirement. "Keep your eyes open, I'll do the wishing." He walked back and forth three times, concentrating, and the door opened. He walked in, Neville following.

Harry let out a low whistle; it had worked even better than he imagined. On a square portion of the floor about two yards long and two yards wide, there was a three-dimensional representation of the castle; the highest point of the castle was seven feet from the ground. Every aspect of the castle was clearly visible, yet transparent, so everything could be seen; the people, four inches tall, could be recognized by their features. Neville gaped. "Wow, you sure know how to wish," he marveled.

"Now, let's just make sure that... okay, there they are," said Harry, relieved that the attackers showed up on this map even though they didn't on the ones Hermione had made. Looking more closely, to his dread, he saw groups of people at both locations where there were two attackers nearby. Two attackers, on their way to Harry's current location, were about to pass the library; Harry felt he had to worry that

they would decide to run in and kill the fifteen or so people the image told Harry were inside. The teachers and Aurors had split into two groups; one was not far from the library, but not close enough to get there in time.

The other two attackers were near a group of ten younger students, probably about ten seconds away from reaching them. Tentatively deciding that he and Neville should go there first, his heart sank as he realized that they were the Slytherin second years. What are they doing? he thought, but of course he knew; he also knew that every second he delayed put someone in danger. His heart heavy, he touched Neville and Apparated them to the library, behind the attackers.

The attackers turned as they clearly heard the popping sounds of an Apparation, but Harry used the Imperius Charm before they could do anything. "Drop all wands and artifacts, as quickly as possible," instructed Harry, and they busily started doing so.

"Everybody, get out here!" shouted Neville into the library. Surprised people started coming out as the attackers dropped the last of their wands.

"On the ground, face down, arms extended," said Harry, and the attackers again did so. Neville wrapped one, as Harry did the other. Harry was about to instruct the people leaving the library to watch over the wrapped attackers, but he saw Snape, Flitwick, Ron, and a few Aurors at the end of the hall, approaching. "Over here!" he shouted, then touched Neville's shoulder, and Disapparated.

They appeared in another hallway, behind the last two attackers, who had caught up to the second years. The second years were sprawled out on the ground as the result,

Harry was sure, of an area-effect spell. He saw a Killing Curse shield disappearing around one of them, and a fireball sailing through the air towards them. Trusting Neville to deal with the fireball, Harry used the Imperius Charm on the attackers. As they turned to face him, Neville whisked the fireball away rapidly; it exploded near a staircase twenty feet away from the second years. Harry quickly put out the fire, then told the attackers to hand over their equipment. Neville collected it as Harry walked to the second years and started helping them up. Pulling Helen to her feet, he said, "You scared me. You were a few seconds away from getting killed."

Looking both guilty and defiant, she said, "We were only trying to help you."

"I know, and I appreciate it. But one of the first things I told you last year was never to walk into danger without knowing what you're facing. Even with the Killing Curse shield, you're a few years of my classes away from being able to deal with these kind of people. Even with ten of you and two of them, there are too many things they can do that you can't stop." Thinking there was something else they should know firsthand, Harry turned to one of the now-compliant attackers. "Who were your targets?" He got the same answer as from the other one, and the Slytherins exchanged amazed looks. Harry noticed that Helen and Sylvia looked more surprised than frightened.

"Why us?" asked Sylvia, puzzled. "Just because we can use the energy of love? Other people are going to learn it, too."

"That's the point," explained Harry. "Voldemort wants to scare other people into not learning it, because it's a threat to him."

Harry saw satisfied, determined looks on a few faces. "Well, then, we're just going to try twice as hard," said David firmly. "And you know, Professor, it wasn't only to help you that we did this. That was part of it, but... they killed a lot of Slytherins, and tried to kill us. We were angry, we wanted to find them."

Harry slowly nodded. "I can understand that... but still, you shouldn't have gone. Anyway, this was the last of them, and it's safe now, so you should go back to your common room."

"Um, we'd sort of rather not, Professor," said Hedrick. "There's all those bodies there..."

Harry hadn't thought of that. "Okay, just go there for a minute, tell Professor Dentus that we got them all; then you can go wherever you want." They thanked him and walked off.

He turned back to Neville and the attackers. "What they did was kind of stupid, wasn't it," commented Neville sympathetically.

"It really was," agreed Harry.

"So, do you think it was more, or less, stupid than trying to get past a huge, aggressive three-headed dog?" asked Neville, allowing himself a smile after he finished speaking.

"Yes, I see your point," said Harry reluctantly. "Let's go find the others. I'll call Ron and Pansy on the pendants, find out where they are." They started walking, the attackers falling in behind them. Because of Harry's spell, they were now harmless, but Harry didn't forget that they had helped kill a dozen people a very short time ago.

A little over an hour later, Harry walked into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, where his friends were waiting for him. Ginny walked up to him and hugged him; it was his first time to see her since the attack. He conjured the carpet, and they sat.

"I guess you all know that I was just in a meeting with McGonagall, Snape, and Kingsley," began Harry. "First, the bad news. The total dead is fourteen. Twelve Slytherins were killed very quickly." Turning to Pansy, he added, "It would have been much more if not for you, Helen, and Sylvia; you saved a few dozen lives. The other two were Ravenclaws who were unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were a third year and a seventh year... the seventh year was Lisa Turpin."

"I know," said Hermione quietly, "we found out who they were by looking at our maps. It's not your fault, Harry."

"I know... just a little reminder any little thing you do can have consequences," he said. "I know she was being rude, and deserved to be thrown out, and if I blame myself I have to blame Archibald more, which I won't. But still..."

"We all assumed they got in through Slytherin somehow, but the strange thing is how," continued Harry. "Something was left behind in the seventh year Slytherin boys' dormitory by one of the ones who left last year. It must have been Crabbe or Goyle, since we would have found it hidden under a Memory Charm if it had been Malfoy or Nott. Hermione, remember that book you told us in the summer you'd read, when Ron made that joke about you going to Hogwarts in another dimension? You said that there was reputed to be a device called a Dimensional Door. Well, this was it."

The rest looked surprised, especially Hermione. "I wonder what else in that book was true..." she marveled. "Does it work the same way the book said?"

"They don't know, of course, but they think so. The attackers—it turns out they were assassins for hire—told us that part of the deal was that the time they would be sent couldn't be predicted, that they would have to be called on short notice. So, that fits in with what you said about the other end moving around all the time. It also means that the other end is somewhere out of the country, since the Aurors would have detected an Apparation from the assassins showing up suddenly, and they didn't."

"But they can find the other end now, right?" asked Hermione. "The assassins would tell you where it was."

"Voldemort thought of that," said Harry regretfully. "He escorted all of them, they had no idea where they were going, so they can't tell us where the fixed end is."

"Sounds like Voldemort didn't have a lot of confidence that they'd succeed," commented Ron.

"Just being careful, I guess," suggested Harry. "This also, of course, explains how the wasps got here, they just sent them through. It was just lucky for them that Blaise happened to not be in the dormitory at that time. And, it was very unlucky that Blaise happened to be in his dormitory this time. They killed him, of course, before he could yell or do anything."

The others looked sad or glanced down. "Poor guy," said Neville, with obvious sorrow. "Like I've said before, that was me if things didn't go my way. It's hard to imagine how things could have not gone his way more than they did. Then, after six years, things start to look up for him, and

then..." He sighed heavily. "His life was so messed up, and it wasn't even his fault. He was starting to come out of his shell, too. I had my first actual conversation with him last week, it was good progress, for him. It's just so..." Neville shook his head, and Hermione took his hand.

"It really stinks," agreed Harry. "I mean, at least if something happened to me, or to any of us... we've all had pretty good lives, especially this past year. But the best part of his life was ahead of him, and then boom, it's gone. It's so unfair." They sat in silence for a minute, each lost in thought.

Finally, he spoke again. "They ran out into the common room, and just started shooting off Killing Curses. Even though you," he said to Pansy, "and the second years got out there as soon as you heard the screams, they managed to kill eleven in that short time."

She nodded grimly. "All four of the other seventh year girls, three sixth year boys, including Thomas, three fifth year boys, and one fifth year girl. They were all older ones because the older ones tended to take the best spots on the sofas and nice chairs, and that area happens to be near the entrance to the seventh year boys' dormitory."

"So, now, you're the only seventh year Slytherin," said Ron sadly.

She nodded. "I wasn't that close to the other girls, as you know, but it was better than it was last year. They didn't look down on me anymore, they liked me okay, it was just that they knew that you were my 'group,' and they were their own group. I lived with them, of course, and did talk to them a certain amount. I'll miss them. It'll be strange being the only one in a whole dormitory."

"I've always wished you could move to mine," said Hermione, "but especially now."

She nodded her thanks. "They'd never allow it, of course, but I'd like that too."

"So, are we stuck with that Dimensional Door thing now?" asked Ron. "I assume there's no way to get rid of it?"

"Not that they know of," said Harry. "McGonagall's going to have the Ministry research it, maybe they'll get lucky and find something. But for now, yeah, we can't do anything. They'll do what countermeasures they can, try to seal off the whole dormitory. By the way, one thing I found out at the meeting... they knew what happened almost immediately, but of course, couldn't react fast enough to save the Slytherins. You remember I told you that they were putting up a monitoring device in that dormitory because of what Blaise and that boy did. It was set with alarms to notify Snape and McGonagall if anyone else entered the dormitory or if magic was used. They were notified as soon as the assassins came in, but by the time they got to places where they could see the images, it was too late."

"So, that's how Snape knew so fast," said Hermione. "Did you get a lecture for not going to Auror headquarters like Snape told you to do?"

Harry shrugged a little. "Kind of, but her heart wasn't in it. I probably shouldn't have done this, but I told her she shouldn't give me orders she knows I can't accept. I kind of didn't want to say it, because it's like insubordination, but I said it because it was true. I said I knew more people would die if I left than if I stayed, and I couldn't live with sitting safe at Auror headquarters while other people were in the danger meant for me. I think she already knew that, though."

I also pointed out that I had the Imperius Charm; she just gave me this look, and said, 'And of course, if you did not have it, you would have gone straight to Auror headquarters.' I didn't say anything, because obviously, she was right."

"Harry, Neville told us what happened after you and he went off alone," said Hermione. "And by the way, I want to see in the Pensieve that thing you had the Room of Requirement create, it sounded amazing. But I want to ask, why did you go to the library before helping the second years? They could have been killed, they almost were."

He nodded somberly. "I hated to do it, believe me. But I had to assume the assassins were going to go into the library, and... the people in the library were totally unaware, had no idea what was happening. The second years knew what they were doing, they did it deliberately. I felt like I had to save the people who didn't choose to be in danger sooner than the ones who did. I don't really know if that's right or not, but I had to make a decision immediately, and that was the one I made." He looked at Pansy, silently asking for her thoughts.

"I'm not going to second-guess you," she said. "If it had been me, I probably would have gone to the second years, just out of emotion, but you have a good point. It's very... principled, I guess. I know it wasn't easy."

"Seems like the kind of thing Dumbledore would have done, putting principle above his personal feelings," suggested Neville. "By the way, Pansy, and Ginny, you should really use the Pensieve to watch the lecture Harry gave on Dumbledore. It was really great, really interesting. I didn't know a lot of that stuff."

"It took him six or seven nights to tell me all of it," said Harry, "and a lot of it was also in the book he wrote me. Of course, there was a lot of stuff I left out. Mostly for the sake of time, but I left out one big detail on purpose. When it came to the part where he killed Grindelwald... he told me that just as the Killing Curse left his wand, he felt this blinding, awful pain in his head, worse than the worst pain he'd ever had. It lasted for just a second or two, then it was gone. He had no idea what caused it. At the time, he could only guess, but he changed his mind much later, after he realized that his magic was based on the energy of love. He thinks that anyone who uses the energy of love who tries to do a really Dark spell, like the Killing Curse or the Cruciatus Curse, will experience what he did."

"So, it was like his ability to use the energy of love was being ripped out, so to speak," said Hermione. "I think I know why you left that out."

Harry nodded. "It would have led to questions about me, whether that would happen to me if I ever tried to kill Voldemort. I'm willing to bet it would."

"Which means you can't even try to kill Voldemort," said Ron, concerned. "If you tried, and failed, you'd lose the ability to use the energy of love, and then you'd be in real trouble."

"I've said all along I don't think I'm going to beat him by killing him," agreed Harry. "I just feel that really strongly. I wonder if the energy of love is causing me to have that feeling, influencing me to feel that killing is just out of the question. I mean, look how reluctant Albus was, how much it took for him to change his mind. And even then, he really agonized over it. He just had such overwhelming guilt at having let Grindelwald escape. He said he only realized

much later that your decisions are probably going to be bad ones if they're made out of guilt. His intuition was always that killing was wrong, no matter what. But, he said, that kind of thing is part of the lessons we all have to learn. That's one of the reasons he was patient and understanding of people's mistakes and bad choices; he said it's part of the process."

"He was always really wise," mused Hermione. "I guess we just didn't know exactly how... hard-earned his wisdom was."

"Harry," said Neville, "I'm sorry, it seems like I'm always the one asking you this, but..."

"How do I feel?" He paused, thinking. "Really sad, of course, but not like Hogsmeade, which I guess is why you asked. It seems like I should be."

"Not that you should feel guilty if you don't," put in Neville quickly.

"I know. I'm not sure what it is. Maybe... I think a lot of what I felt over Hogsmeade had to do with the fact that I was putting people in danger by what I did, danger they didn't choose. By now, though, everyone understands pretty well what's happening, that there's a risk just being around here, around where I am. And since everyone—that I know of, anyway—has supported what I've done, I feel as though we're together in it, not that it's just me and the rest of you. I don't know if that makes any sense, but I guess it's enough to take away enough of my feeling of personal responsibility so that I'm not crying my eyes out."

"I'm glad you're not," said Ginny, reaching over to take his hand. "This wasn't your fault, and Hogsmeade wasn't either."

"Do you think," asked Neville, "that part of it has to do with the fact that you know now that death isn't the last thing?"

"Good question, I don't know. Maybe a little, but I still feel really bad for the friends and relatives, and they don't get to know what I know. I wish they could, but I can't be taking the Pensieve to people I don't even know."

"I also think," suggested Hermione, "that people don't talk to you through Albus unless it was someone you knew well, or someone close to someone you knew well. When Skeeter died, I wondered if she would talk to me through you and Albus, but she didn't." Harry wondered whether Hermione had been hoping to be forgiven, or told something to relieve the huge burden she carried at the time.

"I'd like to be able to talk to Blaise," said Neville. "Just tell him..." Neville trailed off in astonishment as he looked straight ahead, over Harry's shoulder. Harry turned and gaped as he saw Blaise walking toward them, apparently unmindful of the fact that he was walking through chairs. Harry could see through Blaise very easily. He turned to the others, exchanging looks of amazement.

"Hello," said Blaise shyly. "Hi, Neville. You wanted to talk to me?"

Very understandably, Harry thought, Neville stammered and stumbled for a few seconds before getting any words out. "Blaise? How... um..." Neville glanced at Hermione, as if wanting her help, then back at Blaise, who looked surprised to see Neville so discomfited. "How are you doing?" said Neville lamely, obviously unable to think of anything else to say.

Blaise looked thoughtful. "I feel kind of strange, for some reason. I mean, I was taking a nap, and when I woke up,

everything looked different somehow. It just feels strange. Did something happen around here, or is it just me?"

Again, Harry traded looks of shock with the others. Oh, my God, he doesn't realize he's dead, thought Harry. How are we going to tell him? How do you tell someone something like that? 'Oh, by the way, you're dead?' He felt very much at a loss.

Fortunately for him, Hermione spoke. "Blaise, what's, um, what's the last thing you remember before you walked in here?"

"That's the funny thing, I'm not sure," he said; Harry noticed that Blaise wasn't stammering like he usually did, and wondered whether it was because Blaise had been becoming more socially adept, or because he was dead. "I don't even remember waking up and getting out of bed. I felt like I was dreaming, and then Neville wanted to talk to me, and here I am. I'm not even sure how I got here. What's going on?"

The six looked at each other again; clearly, nobody wanted to be the one to tell him. Harry felt he should do it, since only he and Neville had really ever talked to Blaise. He decided to ease into it. "There was... an attack on the school. A group of five assassins, they were looking for me."

"Oh," said Blaise. "But you're okay, right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," Harry replied, feeling that it was very strange that he should have to say that to a dead person. "But it was pretty bad. Fourteen people were killed."

"Oh, no," said Blaise. "Who?"

"Two Ravenclaws, the rest were older Slytherins. Four fifth years, three sixth years... and all the seventh years except

Pansy."

"You mean, except me and Pansy."

Harry sighed, and stood to face Blaise. "I'm sorry, Blaise. You were sleeping, and it happened really fast. They got you with a Killing Curse before you could wake up." He found he felt sadder about Blaise's death than he had since he'd heard about it.

"But, I'm not... dead," protested Blaise. "I'm standing right here."

"Take my hand," said Harry solemnly, offering an outstretched hand. Looking at Harry quizzically, Blaise hesitantly did so, and his hand went through Harry's.

Looking shocked, Blaise took a step back. "Maybe you're the ones who are dead. Maybe the assassins got all of you, and you don't realize it."

"I'm sorry, Blaise, but I haven't been sleeping, none of us have. If I'd been killed, I would have remembered how it happened. You don't remember it because you were sleeping. Hermione, could you show us the map?"

She took out the map, activated it, and stood. Holding it up so Blaise could see it, she pointed at their current location. "It shows just the six of us here," she said sorrowfully. "Changes, students only, two hours," she said to the map. It became blank except for eleven dots and names in the Slytherin common room, the two Ravenclaws found dead in the halls, and Blaise in his dormitory. "This shows students who were here two hours ago but aren't anymore," she went on, to Blaise. "The map knows you're not here."

Blaise stared, uncomprehending, and said nothing for a minute. Finally, he said, "I don't feel dead. I mean, something feels off, but..." He walked over to a chair, tried to grab it, and his hand passed through it. After another pause, he said, "Wow, I guess I am. Strange, this isn't what I thought it would feel like. I mean, I feel almost like I usually do." Another pause, then, "So, does this mean I'm a ghost?"

Harry slowly nodded. "I think so."

"Why, though?" wondered Blaise. "Most people don't become ghosts, they just... go wherever people go. Why me?"

Harry tried not to let his sorrow show in his face or voice. "I'm not sure. Professor Dumbledore told me that ghosts usually stay because they feel they have something to do, something that isn't finished. You know, it might be a good idea for you to talk to him. He could probably help you understand what's going on."

"But he died a while ago... is he a ghost too?"

"No, he isn't, but he... didn't move on yet," Harry said, trying to keep the explanation as simple as possible. "You can talk to him. All you have to do is think about him, concentrate on wanting to talk to him and you'll be able to."

Blaise seemed surprised, and asked, "Can I talk to my grandmother that way?"

Harry felt even sadder, imagining that Blaise had been especially close to his grandmother, and she had perhaps died around when Blaise started at Hogwarts. "No, I'm afraid not. Just Professor Dumbledore, he's kind of a special case; the circumstances of his death were kind of... unusual. But

you really should talk to him, I'm sure he could answer your questions and help you."

"Okay... well, I should go, think about this a little." He started to turn around, then turned back. "Oh, Neville, I remember, I came here because you wanted to talk to me. What did you want to say?"

Looking extremely uncomfortable, Neville looked down, then up again. "I, uh, just wanted to say that your magic was doing much better, and..." Neville shrugged helplessly, then continued, "And, I wished you hadn't died."

"Thanks," said Blaise, looking slightly confused. "I think I'll go back to my dormitory, see what's going on there. See you later." He turned and left, walking through a wall rather than the door. Harry felt his chest tighten as he sat back down on the carpet, and exchanged a look with Neville. Then he turned to Ginny; she saw the expression on his face, and reached over to hold him. He put his head on her shoulder and started sobbing.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 16, Voldemort's Hand: Harry makes a mistake that he fears could lead to more deaths.

From Chapter 16: "That was not the reason you didn't do it! The reason is that you didn't think of it! Tell me that's not true!" Harry gave Snape a look of smoldering anger, but said nothing. "I thought as much," continued Snape derisively. "That should be what it says on your tombstone. 'Here lies Harry Potter. He didn't think.' It's Grindelwald all over again."

16. Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Voldemort's Hand

The next day being Saturday, Harry had his usual training with the Aurors, though it was cut short by an hour to allow Harry and Neville to return to Hogwarts for the memorial service for those who had died. Afterwards, they returned to eat with the Aurors, then have the energy-of-love session. Harry gave them an abridged account of what he'd told the History of Magic class, with special emphasis on the parts having to do with the energy of love; he wanted to emphasize that Dumbledore had felt that there were very negative consequences to feelings of anger, and using the Killing Curse.

Harry spent most of his time on Sunday finishing up his Ring of Reduction. There was supposed to have been a Quidditch practice, but McGonagall had called off all practices for a week, out of respect for Thomas, and the desire not to choose a new Slytherin Seeker so soon after his death. Continuing work on his Ring, Harry wasn't interrupted until three-thirty, when he was called by Snape for a session.

Snape viewed recent memories; enough of interest had happened since the previous session that that took up the time necessary. Snape finished by viewing Harry's presentation to the seventh years on Dumbledore. Putting down his wand, Snape commented, "Ironically, I could have given a much more detailed and accurate lecture, though of course without the emotional content of yours. From my experience doing this with the headmaster, I am intimately familiar with the events of which you spoke."

Harry could well imagine that. "But you probably found it annoying, all that agonizing he did over something that you would consider obvious."

"I would not say 'annoying,' but rather, something very far outside my experience. It was useful as a way to understand how he thought, and I was not unmindful of the fact that had he not been the person he was, he would not have been able to assist me as he did. I only became impatient when what he did had an effect in the here and now, in the struggle against the Dark Lord."

It suddenly occurred to Harry that Snape had probably seen Voldemort the day before, when Harry had been with the Aurors. "Speaking of which, how is the ol' Dark Lord, anyway?" he asked flippantly.

Snape gave Harry a very disapproving look, as though he were tempting fate. "Before you used his name to mock him; now you use the phrase 'the Dark Lord' to do so. As you obviously surmise, he is most displeased, though his expectations of the success of this operation were not high."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "His opinion of me must be going up, if he sends five supposedly world-class assassins after me and doesn't expect them to do the job."

"They were not the best in the world," clarified Snape. "The very best would not take the assignment, because of the uncertainty of the timing, the fact that Hogwarts is a secure environment which does not allow for Disapparation, and your reputation for surviving. A Death Eater told me that one potential assassin, when approached, said, 'If the Dark Lord wants Potter dead so badly, he should do it himself.'"

Harry couldn't keep a grin off his face. "Bet he loved that."

Snape nodded. "It is precisely the sort of attitude that he wants to avoid. In your lecture to the class, you were quite perceptive in noting that this is a weakness of the Dark Lord's, the fear and awe in which he insists on being held. It interferes with his goal of power, with operational priorities. Speaking of which, I thought I would inform you that the headmistress and I agreed that I would inform the Dark Lord of your reference to him as an..." Snape paused, obviously uncomfortable with even quoting something so insulting to Voldemort, "...'unbelievable moron.' It has spread around the school to such an extent that it will undoubtedly spread outside, and he would find out eventually. Since I obviously would have heard it, it was better that I tell him."

Harry had heard that his comment was being widely quoted, and that it was starting to be used by students with each other if one said something another thought was stupid. "Is that the kind of thing he really wants to know?" Harry wondered, surprised.

"He wants to know of any disrespect to him, so he can take punitive action if he chooses to," said Snape. "He has not given specific instructions that disrespect from you is not to be quoted. His reaction to what you said was... understated, but clear."

Harry smiled a little, imagining it; then he had another thought. "Is Voldemort a 'shoot-the-messenger' type?"

"I am not familiar with the reference, no doubt Muggle, but I gather the meaning. Fortunately, no, that is not one of his weaknesses. Your concern, however, is most touching," said Snape dryly.

Harry chuckled. "Thanks, I'm glad you appreciate it. So, does he believe that there's such a thing as the energy of love

now?" asked Harry.

Snape shook his head. "He accepts that you have found a new type of magic; the evidence supporting that is overwhelming. He does not accept that it is based in love, even given your success in teaching your friends and three others. I have told him of your methods of teaching it; naturally, he sneers at it." I hope he keeps sneering, thought Harry. "He speculates that the true source of the power is something which is transmitted accidentally along with the teaching."

"Boy, talk about a blind spot," said Harry in wonder.

"Keep in mind, though, that many in the Ministry did not believe it at first, either," pointed out Snape, "and they were not nearly as invested in disbelieving it as the Dark Lord. I myself might not have believed it were it not for my experience with the headmaster; it is only because he found love such a source of strength that he could be the person he was, as you explained to Professor Dentus's class.

"There is one unfortunate development which has arisen in the wake of this event," continued Snape. "You recall that the Dark Lord instructed me to find a way to kill you, and only the headmistress's actions prevented him from making it a matter of urgency. Now, he has made it such a matter, deciding that your elimination is a higher priority than the possibility of my becoming headmaster."

"That's not good," said Harry solemnly. Deadpan, he added, "I guess you'll have to kill me, then."

Snape rolled his eyes. "It is a serious matter, your macabre humor notwithstanding." At Harry's blank look, he sighed. "Perhaps Professor Smith has a point when he says there

should be some non-magical instruction at Hogwarts. Your vocabulary is sadly deficient."

"I'll ask Hermione the next time I see her," he joked. "But John'll be happy to hear that you said that. Anyway, obviously I know it's serious. Is there a deadline?"

"He is at work acquiring an artifact, one that he is sure will do the job; he said he will have it for me before winter vacation ends. So, one could say that the deadline is roughly mid-January. After that, if I have not made an attempt, he will want to know why. I do not yet know the nature of the artifact, so I cannot know if a plausible excuse to avoid its use exists."

"But probably, you'll have to leave Hogwarts, right?" asked Harry.

Snape nodded. "Unfortunately, yes, it likely cannot be avoided. Exactly what will be done, again, cannot be known until we know more about the artifact. But the most likely scenario involves my 'capture' and imprisonment."

"What if Professor McGonagall-" began Harry, but Snape cut him off.

"No, it will do no good, as I have already explained to her. The Dark Lord is determined; even if she were to die tomorrow, he would not change his plans."

"Too bad we can't fake my death," mused Harry. "Well, this is pretty bad. Maybe we'll get lucky, and something will happen in the meantime to change the situation."

"It is highly doubtful," said Snape in an admonishing tone, as if it was irresponsible of Harry to get his hopes up. "In addition to the more important problems the situation poses,

the headmistress must soon search for a new Potions master."

"I forgot about that," said Harry. "She can't start looking yet, of course. I guess we can't do much until after vacation. So, is there anything else you think I should know?"

Snape nodded, and reached for a small box on a shelf above his desk; he put it on the desk nearest Harry. "These are Mr. Zabini's personal effects, which will be sent back to his relatives. There are a few things I thought would interest you, in the folder on the top."

Puzzled, Harry took the folder and opened it. To his surprise, on the top was a Harry Potter Chocolate Frog card. Below that were articles obviously clipped from the Prophet; the one on the top was from April of that year, detailing his escape from the Chamber and his discovery of the Killing Curse shield. Looking through the articles, he saw that all featured him prominently, and were in chronological order. He was fairly sure that they were all of the articles the Prophet had written about him; the one written by Skeeter was there as well. Harry looked up at Snape, who was wearing a satisfied smirk. With sudden discomfort, he knew what Snape thought; as for himself, he wasn't sure what to think.

"I don't think this means what you obviously think it means," said Harry defensively. "Lots of people have my Chocolate Frog card. A couple dozen students asked me to autograph ones they'd gotten over the summer."

"Odd that he did not ask," commented Snape. "What is also odd is that in his belongings there were no other Chocolate Frog cards, only yours. I am given to understand that the

chances of getting any particular card in one package are less than one in five hundred."

Harry wondered how Snape knew that. "It was one in twenty when they came out," he pointed out.

"He would not have purchased it then," said Snape. "You will note that the articles date from Easter, after the last of the others had... departed. While they were there, he no doubt felt that his belongings could be searched at any time by the others, and would not want to have risked them finding such a thing."

Harry thought that Blaise could have bought cards on vacation in January, left them at home, and brought this one in when the term started in September, but then the question became, why only Harry's card. He found himself becoming annoyed with Snape. "It could have been that he just admired me. After all, it was in trying to kill me that the four people who made his life miserable ended up leaving Hogwarts, it's no surprise that he should support me."

"It is not impossible," agreed Snape, still wearing the smirk.

Harry sighed, getting more and more annoyed. "And even if it does mean what you think it means, I don't care."

Snape's smirk became even more pronounced. "You mean, you wish you did not care. You clearly do. As Professor Dentus once pointed out to you, your feelings show very clearly on your face."

Harry was not happy to have a memory Snape got from their sessions used against him in that way. "Do you really want to be having Schadenfreude at my expense? I thought we both knew that wasn't helpful."

Now Snape's smirk vanished, and he became serious. "I am trying to make a point. This causes you great discomfort, for a reason. If there were nothing wrong with this, we would not feel such revulsion at the prospect. Tolerance of this sort of thing only leads to suffering."

Only if both parties aren't willing, Harry thought, but didn't say. He realized he had to be careful around Snape about the topic, as it had caused Snape to violate the understanding they had once already, and he didn't feel like getting into a fight with Snape, especially over this topic. Snape was being deliberately provocative, but Harry knew he didn't have to respond to the provocation, and that it was better that he didn't. "I think I should probably go," he said, standing. He waited a second for Snape to object if he wanted to, but Snape said nothing, so Harry walked to the door and left. Please, he thought as he walked away, if any boys at Hogwarts touch each other again, please let me not hear about it.

* * * * *

Phoenixes on their shoulders, Harry and Hermione walked out of the staff room the next afternoon, heading to the Charms classroom. "Not much conversation in there today, was there," she remarked.

"Sometimes there isn't," he replied. "I guess people are still pretty... whatever, over what happened on Friday. I still can't believe McGonagall got those owls." McGonagall had told the staff that she had received a few dozen owls over the weekend criticizing her for what had happened. "I mean, it wasn't like she opened the gates and let them in."

"Yes, but people don't know how it happened," pointed out Hermione. "It was a hard decision Professor McGonagall had

to make. Parents, both of those who died and those who didn't, deserve to know how it happened. But operational security has to come first, and it's better if Voldemort doesn't know that we know how it happened. So Professor McGonagall gets stuck between her responsibilities as headmistress and as a leader of the Order."

"Ironically, if they knew what happened, they would blame Albus," said Harry. "It was on his watch that the Dimensional Door was put there, and it probably wouldn't have happened if he had routinely searched all of the sons of Death Eaters whenever they re-entered Hogwarts, like most parents would now have preferred he had."

"McGonagall wouldn't have searched them either," said Hermione.

"I'm not so sure," responded Harry. "She's done a few things that Albus wouldn't have done. I know she wouldn't like it, but she's not an absolutist, like he was. If she thought the need was dire enough, she might have done it. Yes, she defended what he did last year, but then, so did we."

"Maybe you're right," she conceded. "By the way, you just used his name in the past tense."

Again, he hadn't noticed. "I think I do when I'm thinking of him as doing things in the physical world, as opposed to how he thinks and feels. He can't do things in the physical world, or won't, but he's still around."

They reached the classroom, and took their usual seats. "So, this is everybody?" Harry asked Pansy, who was sitting next to him.

She nodded sadly. "This is the whole class, nine people. It feels strange."

"Not as strange as sleeping alone in your dormitory," suggested Ron, turning in his seat in front of Pansy.

"That's true," she agreed. "By the way, this is also strange, but... last night, about a half an hour before I went to bed, Blaise showed up in my dormitory."

Harry could see that the others were as surprised as he was. "What was he doing there?" asked Ron.

"He was kind of in a corner, like he was trying not to disturb me," said Pansy, clearly not bothered. "When I saw him, I called to him, and I talked to him a little. He apologized for going in there, he said he'd never seen a girls' dormitory before, and wondered what it looked like. I said it looked pretty much like the boys' dormitories."

"I just hope he doesn't start wondering what the girls' shower looks like," said Hermione, looking a little nervous.

"He didn't stay long, but I did take the opportunity to do something I'd been meaning to do," continued Pansy. "I apologized to him for what I'd done to him before. I meant to do it while he was alive, I just never found the right time. But at least I got to do it. When he died, one of the things I was thinking was that I wished I had."

"How did he respond?" asked Neville.

"About like you'd expect," she said. "Kind of nervous, but he seemed to appreciate it. He left soon after that, fortunately; I didn't want to have to ask him to leave. Now I kind of wonder what his Ring was going to be. Probably he hadn't finished it; I don't think anyone had by last Friday. Well, except you, of course," she grinned, glancing at Hermione.

"I kept changing it a little up until yesterday, but yes, I was pretty much finished last week," admitted Hermione. "I wanted to get it out of the way, to study for the exams in the other classes. And I had to make exams for the first and second years, that was interesting, but-" She cut herself off as Flitwick entered the room and walked up the steps leading to his platform behind the podium.

Flitwick led them in a moment of silence in memory of the five Slytherins in the class who had died on Friday, then announced that he would be inspecting the students' completed Rings. "Remember, if I cannot enter it, points will be taken off. It should be set so that anyone can enter. After I have inspected it, you should change the charm to only allow yourself or close relatives entry unescorted." With a small grin, he added, "I will begin with those of my fellow professors. Hermione, yours first, please." Hermione walked up to the front of the class as Flitwick walked down the steps to the floor; she bent over and handed him her Ring.

As she walked back to the others, Neville said, "Okay, we have to decide who goes with Harry to see his, since we're all pretty keen to."

"Especially since by making it two-by-two instead of one-by-one he did more work on it than he had to, which I think is a homework first for him," teased Hermione. "Let's flip a Galleon for it." Amused, Harry watched as Neville won the flip with Hermione, and Pansy the one with Ron. Pansy won the final flip, and with a smile, walked over to Harry and took his hand after he placed his Ring on the floor. He took a small handful of Floo powder, threw it down, and stepped on the Ring, saying, "Harry Potter!"

They were inside, and looking out at a vast expanse consisting of green grass and clear blue sky. Nothing else

was visible except the wall near them, and two brooms floating in midair a few feet from the door. "Wow," marveled Pansy. "I forgot that you could make it bigger than the usual dimensions. How big is it?"

"I ended up deciding on three hundred meters in each dimension," he said. Letting go of her hand, he took one of the brooms and handed it to her. "You know the dimensions have to be the same, it has to be a perfect cube."

"I assume that's a Hover Charm keeping the brooms there," she said.

"Yes," he said, taking the second one. "There's also a Summoning Charm in the same spot, so when we finish and go to the next door, they'll come back here."

"Good idea." She looked at the broom she'd been handed. "Did you buy these just for this?"

He nodded. "I decided to buy a couple of cheap brooms to keep in here permanently. I assume you've guessed the purpose of this room?"

"To practice flying," she answered, "that's why you made it so big. Ron's going to love this, he'll love the idea of practicing even if it's raining outside." She and Harry mounted the brooms, and they kicked off and flew toward the other side of the room. "I would fly around with you for a while," she said, "but I guess I have to remember we're in a class, so we shouldn't take any more time than we have to."

"Yeah, I was thinking of Ron when I had this idea," he said. "I wanted to do a few more details, like maybe some clouds, but I was kind of pressed for time as it was. I was thinking that maybe during vacation, I would do some copies of this, one-room Rings just for this purpose. I could work on little

things like that, maybe give one to each House so people could practice flying anytime they wanted."

Pansy chuckled. "You're funny when you're naive. McGonagall would never allow these to be in the common rooms. You may not have noticed, but these could be used for purposes other than flying, and since only two people can enter at once, they couldn't be supervised."

"You're right, I hadn't thought of that," he admitted. "Maybe I could find a way to make it so that wouldn't be a problem. I really thought it would be great for flying practice." They slowed down as they approached the door to the second room. "Do you think these are ever made with that purpose in mind?"

"Maybe that's a part of the book that Hermione didn't get to before she stopped reading," joked Pansy as they dismounted their brooms. "Anyway, this room was a really good idea. Very practical."

They let their brooms fall to the floor as they stood in front of the door to the next room; the brooms immediately zoomed away to their destination near the other door. "After you," he said as he gestured for her to go ahead.

She touched the door, and it opened. They stepped inside, and their environment was suddenly very different. There was still grass under their feet, but instead of a clear blue sky, there was a sunset in the distance, or what looked like the distance. And instead of total quiet, as there had been in the first room, there was phoenix song. "Oh, Harry, it's beautiful," gushed Pansy. "Is that... oh, my, is that both of them I'm hearing?"

"Yes, it was really good of them. I kind of hesitated to ask, because it seemed like a frivolous reason. But at the same

time, this was important to me, and of course Fawkes and Flora both knew that. They sang together for about fifteen minutes; I set it so it repeats after it's done. The recording isn't quite the same as it is in the real world, but it's still pretty good."

"It's great," she assured him. "And now I'm definitely starting to think about other purposes for this room; I'll be wanting to come back here with Ron sometime."

Harry smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. Of course, Flitwick will get these when we're done, but there may be a way around that. I made two copies of this, one as a backup just in case. Maybe I can do a little touch-up work on the backup, change a few things."

"Maybe sand instead of grass," she suggested. "But this is really nice... I guess we should move on to the third room, though, unfortunately. I could stay here for hours."

He was very pleased with her reaction. "It's not really my doing, though; most people don't have access to phoenix song."

"That's because most people don't get chosen. Now, stop being modest and we can move on." He feigned meek acquiescence, and they walked to the center of the room, then turned left, then walked straight again until they were in front of the door to the third room. This time he opened it, and it was dark, except for a spotlight in the center of the room. They walked straight ahead, and stood in the light together. The light suddenly moved off them, to a spot two meters in front of them. An image flickered into existence; it was Harry. As the real Harry watched, he found it odd to be looking at himself. The image spoke.

"This message is for my children, I should say, my future children, since obviously I don't have any right now. I'm seventeen, the same age I assume you'll be when you see this. It's strange; as I speak, my future is very uncertain, but I have to speak as though Voldemort is defeated, since if he's not, there won't be any children to see this message. So, for right now, I have to assume that's what happened.

"I wanted to leave this message because... I don't know, I thought maybe you'd like to see what I was like when I was the age you are now. I would have liked to see my father like this. Of course, it would be different, since I never knew him, but with any luck I'll still be around by the time you see this. Still, since I know that any children I have who go to Hogwarts will see this, it seemed like a good use of a room.

"As I record this, it's the middle of December of my seventh year at Hogwarts. Voldemort keeps making attempts on my life, I think there've been... eight so far, it's hard to keep track. The last one was a few days ago. The hardest thing about these is that they put my friends in danger, and people get killed. This time, fourteen people got killed. Everyone's told me dozens of times that it's not my fault, that I'm doing what I should be doing in fighting Voldemort. I know it's true, but what you know doesn't make what you feel much different. I've been through so much already, sometimes I feel like I'm a lot older than I am.

"My friends get me through it, though. Of course I mean Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Pansy, and Neville. Whatever I've done, I could never have done without them, I know that. I couldn't have even discovered the energy of love, because I wouldn't have had anyone to love. I hope, I pray, that they're all still around by the time you see this. I really want them to be a part of your lives." Pansy smiled at Harry and took his hand as they watched. "And I wish you could have

known Professor Dumbledore. He was so amazing when he was alive, and he still is now; it's a great comfort to have him to talk to every night while I sleep. He may have died, but he hasn't stopped looking after me. And obviously, I need all the help I can get right now.

"I'll probably have a lot of stories to tell by the time you see this, and maybe I'll have already told you a lot of them. It may seem like an exciting time, as someone said to me recently, but I can't wait for it to be over. That's because the one thing that comes along with this whole experience is death. From Albus, I know that we continue to exist after we die, but we miss and mourn the people who died, and I've just had enough of it. I want so much to go for even a whole year and have no one I know die of anything but natural causes. It doesn't seem like so much to ask for.

"Well, that's what my life is like right now. Pansy once said it was like someone turned the volume of my life all the way up, and it does feel like that. The good things are really good, and the bad things are really bad. I probably couldn't deal with it if not for what Albus taught me, and the others' help. I imagine that when you watch this, my life will be very routine. If so, the next time you talk to me, remind me of what I said here, and to appreciate it. Maybe I'll just say, 'I do, believe me.' It just seems like a good thing to keep in mind.

"I'll stop here. I just want to say, I may not know you yet, but I know that I'll love you. And I hope you'll like working on your Ring; I know I did. It kind of makes you think about what's important to you. In these four rooms... there's flying, which has always made me happy even when not much else did. There's Fawkes, in the second room, someone else without whose help I wouldn't be here. In this room, there's you, who I know will be an extremely important part of my

life one day. And in the fourth room... well, it's kind of self-explanatory. Take care of yourself, and everyone around you. I love you." The image disappeared.

Eyes brimming with tears, Pansy turned to face him. "You're going to be such a good father," she said, squeezing his hand for emphasis. Harry smiled, remembering that Ginny had said exactly the same thing when he had shown her the completed Ring the night before. They walked ahead, to the entrance to the fourth room. Pansy put her hand to the door, and it opened.

They walked in to see a completely empty room; all that could be seen was a lit area five feet in front of them. They walked forward and stood in it, and the room suddenly came to life. They were in the shack on the island to which Vernon had taken Harry, Dudley, and Petunia when Harry started receiving the letters inviting him to attend Hogwarts. Hagrid was standing near a very small Harry, just eleven years old. "Yer a wizard, Harry," he said. Harry glanced over to see Pansy smiling at the astonished look on the young Harry's face.

The scene shifted; not instantaneously, but the old scene faded out and the new one faded in quickly. Harry was on the Hogwarts Express, meeting Ron for the first time. Then came his first conversation with Dumbledore, in the room with the Mirror of Erised. There were memories, usually about ten to fifteen seconds each, of important events of his third and fourth years, involving Lupin, Sirius, Cedric, and Voldemort's rebirth, ending with Dumbledore's speech about doing what was difficult and right rather than what was easy and wrong. The next two minutes were memories of events of the past year and a half, focusing on the Aurors, the other Hogwarts professors, and the Slytherin second years.

The next thing they saw was Harry coming out of Gryffindor Tower and finding Pansy waiting outside. "Oh, Harry, I'm glad it's you. I want to talk to you. I want to help you." The real Pansy glanced at Harry in surprise as the scene shifted again, to a memory from a few days later, of Pansy insisting on helping Harry undercover despite Harry's objections and concerns. They then saw themselves in Dumbledore's office, him thanking her for saving his life after the Goyle attempt. The scene dissolved to Harry wishing the unconscious Pansy a fast recovery after Malfoy's attack, most of his speech in the Great Hall about what she had done, then finally to the applause she received the next day, after recovering from her injuries. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she put an arm around Harry and leaned her head against his shoulder. "I want them to know what you did," he said quietly. "What all of you did, what you've done for me."

The next group of scenes involved Neville: his confronting Harry, Ron, and Hermione as they set out to retrieve the Sorcerer's Stone, and his ten points that won them the House Cup; his attempt to help Harry at the Department of Mysteries; his dueling victory over Malfoy, his and Harry's training with the Aurors, and what he said to Harry after the attack in Dentus's fireplace.

There followed similar scenes involving Ginny, Hermione, then Ron, taking a minute to a minute and a half for each person. Finally, there were scenes featuring Dumbledore, including his duel with Voldemort, his performing Harry and Ginny's Joining, and his final goodbye to Harry before the June confrontation with Voldemort. From there, the scene changed to Harry's conversation with McGonagall at the staff social event about how Dumbledore would be remembered. That scene faded to a still image of Dumbledore as he appeared in the phoenix place; he had included it because while he wasn't supposed to show

scenes from that place, the still image alone didn't give evidence of where it had come from. The image remained for five seconds, then faded, and the room was empty again. Harry and Pansy silently walked forward and opened the last door, stepped through, and were suddenly in the class again.

Ron, Hermione, and Neville looked at Pansy for her reaction. Smiling, Hermione produced a packet of tissues and proffered it to Pansy. Pansy took only one tissue, saying, "You'll need them later." Hermione assured her that she had more.

Flitwick came by, saying, "That took longer than I would have thought. Well, I'll be next, then." Harry occupied himself by looking at Neville's Ring, followed by Ron's, then Pansy's. Soon after he exited that one, he saw Flitwick appear, just having finished viewing Harry's. He smiled at Harry and said, "It's quite... memorable. How will you be locking it?"

"Actually, I wanted to have you test that," said Harry. He waved his wand at his Ring, then said, "Okay, it's in place. Would you do me a favor, Professor: try to enter, but when you do, also point your wand at it and do the 'Blue' spell silently." Raising his eyebrows, Flitwick did so, and was unable to enter. "Okay, that's what I thought would happen," said Harry. "Now, Hermione and Neville, I want you to try. Do the same thing that he did. If you get in, just go ahead and view it." They did, and both successfully entered the Ring.

Flitwick nodded, impressed. "The measuring spell," he surmised.

"Yes," confirmed Harry. "So, you can get in by being a close relative of mine, or by being able to use the energy of love.

Well, or by getting 100 without using the energy of love, but that's really rare. Also, if two people go, both of them have to be able to use it. Anyway, that's going to be its final lock. At least for this year, anyone who wants to try to enter it can do so."

"I imagine people may try to do it, if only to see whether they've reached 100," said Flitwick, who then moved on, inspecting Ron's next. Harry chatted with Ron and Pansy; Ron tried to get Pansy to tell him what was in Harry's Ring, but she refused.

"You're going to have to find out for yourself," she admonished him. "But I'll get an extra tissue packet from Hermione, you might need it."

"Somehow I think I'll hold up okay," said Ron humorously.

They chatted for the next ten minutes, then suddenly Neville and Hermione appeared. Neville looked as though he had just been crying, and Hermione still was. Seeing Harry, she smiled, and sent him her feelings through Flora and Fawkes.

* * * * *

Four days later, Harry and Hermione took their usual seats in the staff room after eating lunch. "No, it's hardly unexpected," said Dentus, obviously continuing a conversation that was in progress before they came in. "I'm almost surprised that this didn't happen until now, really." Looking over at Harry, he explained. "In the wake of last Friday's attack, Professor McGonagall has come under increasing pressure from parents regarding Hogwarts' security."

"I received a scroll this morning," continued McGonagall, "signed by fifty-nine parents, asking for a meeting as soon as possible. They want me to respond to their concerns about security. The letter hints that they may pull their children from Hogwarts if they are not satisfied with my answers."

"Damn," muttered Harry, frustrated. "Don't they know that their children aren't especially safe anywhere, these days?"

"They do," agreed Dentus, "but unfortunately, it can't be denied that Hogwarts is a particular target..." He trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

"Because of me," Harry finished for him. He looked down, thinking, then looked at McGonagall. "Are you going to meet with them?"

"I believe I have little choice," she said, resigned. "Perhaps not all the parents who signed this would remove their children, but it is likely that some would. In addition, the fact is that they do deserve some kind of answer. Five percent of all Hogwarts students were killed last week; it is not as though their concerns are unreasonable."

"Yes, but there's nothing that you've done that you shouldn't have, or that you haven't done that you should have," Harry pointed out. She shrugged lightly in response, conveying that as true as that was, it was also irrelevant. "Okay, well, I should be at this meeting, too. After all, it's because of me that this is happening."

"The school allowed you to start your crusade," replied McGonagall. "As Professor Dumbledore was fond of pointing out, the headmistress is responsible for everything that happens at Hogwarts, whether it is in her power to control or not. We could have stopped you from doing what you have

done. Not that we should have, but the concerns of the parents have to be addressed, and you do not bear ultimate responsibility for what has happened."

"Yes, but if I may," suggested Dentus, "it would be, in any case, an excellent idea for Harry to be there. Not to absolve you of responsibility, of course, but to remind parents of the greater struggle we face. Also, to remind them that Harry can provide a certain amount of security--"

"I don't want him providing security!" snapped McGonagall. "I want him being secure!" There was silence as a few teachers looked at McGonagall, surprised. Calming down, she glanced at Dentus in apology; he nodded. "It's just that, as you know, I've also been criticized for attempting to send Harry to Auror headquarters as soon as we found out. I do recognize that were it not for his disregarding my instructions, more people almost certainly would have died. He must be protected, at all costs. But how do you explain to a parent that their child may be one of the costs?"

"Professor," said Harry, very serious, "I do understand. But I did what I did because it was what I could live with. You know how I am about this; I'm going to do the same thing if anything like this happens again. Since that's the case anyway, we might as well tell the parents that. It may be difficult for you to say that, because you want me protected at all costs. But it wouldn't be difficult for me to say. I really should be there."

"There is another benefit of him being there," added Dentus to McGonagall. "To put it rather bluntly, his presence may shame some of the parents into a less aggressive posture."

"Is that really going to work anymore?" wondered Harry. "I mean, parents are going to say, he's got the shields and the

Imperius Charm, and he's really strong, so he's not in that much danger, but my child has none of that, and is very vulnerable."

Dentus shook his head. "A few might, but most aren't going to think that way. Nobody forgets that when you started defying Voldemort, you had none of those things. Nobody forgets what you withstood, to do it. You're still a symbol; your presence would remind parents that we are in a fight, and that we have to fight and not put our heads down. I understand how they feel, but if they start pulling their children, it'll be an encouragement to Voldemort."

"It's a lot to ask of anyone, though, to leave their children in danger as a point of principle," said Flitwick. "I think we have to persuade them that their children will be safe at Hogwarts."

"You mean, I have to persuade them," corrected McGonagall. "Very well, Harry, you may attend. Yes, Hermione?"

"I was thinking, Professor, as a professor and one of the ones who can use—"

"I was planning on only taking the Heads of House," interrupted McGonagall, "but I suppose you do have a point. You may attend as well. You can assure the parents that you will keep Harry safe as he keeps their children safe. By the way, Harry, you will probably have to answer questions about teaching combat flying. Two of the owls I received mentioned it; some parents may think that you are attempting to convince their children to take part in a dangerous battle. I know that is not your intention," she said quickly, heading off his objection, "I am just telling you what a few may think. You may want to emphasize that you are

teaching it only to those who are seventeen, or who will be seventeen by the end of the term."

Harry found that he hadn't thought about parents disapproving of his teaching combat flying because their children might want to take part in a battle. He had felt as though he was helping people by preparing them for a battle they would want to fight anyway, but he wondered how many might participate now who wouldn't have before.

"Oh, Harry, what Hermione said reminded me," said Sprout. "You're doing the testing this week, how are they doing? No new 100's, I suppose?"

"Afraid not," he replied. "Some people are getting very close, though. Hedrick had 99, and Augustina, 97. All three Creeveys made big jumps; they're all in the low nineties. Oh, and this morning, I had your Hufflepuff fifth years; some of them had pretty big jumps. You said they were doing their own sessions, right?"

She nodded. "And the third years."

"Yes, they did well, too," he said. "And the Creeveys are part of a group of Gryffindors of a few different years who asked Ginny to help them with their own sessions. So it looks like people who had their own sessions had much more improvement than the ones who didn't."

"That may get more groups going," said Sprout.

"Archibald, I wanted to ask what you thought of that analysis article in the Prophet this morning, about people getting angrier about the Death Eaters," said Hermione. "I know you probably don't have firsthand knowledge of this, but do you think it sounds accurate, or like there's a 'point of view' to it?"

"That's the one that said that the Ministry was considering giving Aurors permission to kill, right?" asked Sprout.

Dentus nodded. "I'm not sure, Hermione. If I had to guess, I'd say it was pretty accurate. They've been ramping up the killings lately, including the ones this week. That kind of attitude doesn't surprise me at all."

Harry was grateful that Hermione had read him the article, so he knew enough to comment. "But what that article didn't say was that being able to kill is going to make almost no difference at all to the Aurors, it's not going to make people any safer. There are very few situations where incapacitating isn't enough, where killing is necessary."

"That may be, you'd know better than I would," agreed Dentus. "But this isn't so much about increasing the Aurors' effectiveness. This is symbolic, and political. If the Ministry did this, it would be about responding to public anger over all the deaths."

Snape spoke next, surprising Harry; Snape rarely spoke in staff room discussions unless asked a question. "In addition, it would be a message to Death Eaters, meant to unnerve them and make them less bold. It would be a psychological weapon for the Aurors, useful to them even if they never used a Killing Curse. You may want to discuss it with them."

Now Harry understood why Snape had spoken; he was trying to make a point to Harry, that he needed to think about larger issues than his basic aversion to killing. Harry also knew that as a practical matter, Aurors already had the right to kill; unless they mistakenly killed an innocent person, they would never be brought to account for killing. "I will," said Harry to Snape.

Fifteen minutes later, Harry and Hermione walked into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Hermione took her usual seat; as Harry approached the front of the room, he felt a tap on his arm. Turning in surprise, he looked down at Sally-Anne Perks. Looking nervous, she made a small directional gesture in front of her body. "What's he doing here?" she half-whispered. Harry looked in the direction she was pointing, and saw Blaise's ghost, standing in the far corner of the room. Eyebrows rising, he found himself wondering the same thing she was. He reversed direction, walking towards the back of the class, then a few steps in Blaise's direction.

"Hi, Blaise," he said, in as friendly and casual as tone as he could manage. "Can I help you with something?"

Blaise looked surprised at the question. "No, not really. Just wanted to join the class, is all. I would sit down, but I can't, so..."

Harry's eyebrows narrowed in puzzlement. "Yes, but you wouldn't be able to, you know, practice or anything."

"I know, but this class is usually pretty interesting anyway," said Blaise. "There's really not that much to do, as a ghost."

"Really?" asked Harry. "I'd have thought there was a lot, since you can go anywhere. Well, it's a little unusual; you know we usually don't have ghosts in classes. Could you let me talk to the class about it for a minute? If you could just wait out in the hall..."

"Okay," said Blaise agreeably, and drifted through the wall into the hall.

Harry soundproofed the room as he walked to the front of the class. "I assume you're uncomfortable with him being

here?" he asked Sally-Anne.

"Well, yeah," she said, as if it were obvious. "I mean, he's a ghost..."

Two rows away, Neville spoke up. "Why is that a problem? There are ghosts all over the place here."

"But not in classes," responded Sally-Anne.

"There was Professor Binns," Neville pointed out.

"That was different," she argued.

"Why?" asked Neville simply. She gave him an exasperated look, but didn't answer.

"Does anyone else have a problem with Blaise being here, as long as he doesn't talk or participate?" Harry asked the class. No one raised a hand, so Harry turned to Sally-Anne. He recalled that she had been friends with Lisa, so he tried another approach. "Let me ask you, Sally-Anne... if it were Lisa's ghost, would you have a problem with it?" She looked down uncomfortably, and thought for a few seconds. Then she sighed, and gestured her acquiescence. Harry walked out to the hall, invited Blaise in, and resumed his place in front of the class.

First he tested everyone on the energy of love; everyone knew they'd be checked that day, and he wanted to get it out of the way, so people wouldn't be thinking about it all the time in class. Everyone's score improved over the previous test, by a range of two to ten points. Except for Harry's four friends, the highest score was Susan's 93, followed by Justin's 92. As Susan sat down after getting her score, Justin said, "I guess we need some more practice. Looks like it's back to the couples' places for us."

Harry joined in the class's laughter, and added, "And vacation's almost here, so you can do even better than that."

"So, that's a homework assignment, right?" asked Justin, to more laughter. "I mean, it would be nice to say to my mum, 'Susan and I have to go upstairs to do our homework,' and have it be true."

"Sorry, I think I have to be able to deny that," said Harry. He then praised the class for their progress, and started that class's energy-of-love session. Thirty minutes later, he said, "Okay, now, today's topic is area-effect spells. Not how to do them, of course, but how to defend against them. There are two main ways. The best one is if you happen to know the counter-curse to the spell being done, you can just use it. The other one is the one I'll be teaching you today; it's only a temporary measure, good for some basic protection for a few seconds while you can hopefully get out of the area of the spell. Now, the—"

"Harry?" said Blaise timidly. Most of the class turned to look at Blaise.

Harry was so surprised he didn't think to chastise Blaise. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry, I know I wasn't supposed to talk, but I have a message for you. The message is: 'You're going to be called. It's a trap.'"

A chill ran down Harry's spine as everyone turned to stare at Blaise. Harry walked over to the right side of the room, closer to his four friends. Fawkes and Flora appeared almost simultaneously, perching on the podium and Hermione's desk, respectively. "How does he know that?" asked Harry, of no one in particular.

"I told you, it was a message," said Blaise.

"No, I don't mean you, I mean him," said Harry absently.

"Who's the message from, Blaise?" asked Dean, sitting at the back of the room, closest to Blaise.

Before Harry had a chance to tell Blaise not to answer, he did. "Professor Dumbledore," he said.

There was a gasp. "And you mustn't repeat that to anyone," instructed Harry, "which Professor McGonagall will be telling you as well." Turning to his friends, he said, "I assume he means from the Aurors, in which case, we'll all get the call."

"If we get it, Harry, don't go," urged Hermione. "Stay here, let us go."

He stared at her incredulously. "Oh, yeah, good idea. I'll do that."

"I'm serious!" she shouted. "You know Albus isn't usually your eye-in-the-sky, he wouldn't have warned you unless it was really serious! You can't go!"

"I have to, you know that," he responded. "The Aurors are counting on me to be there, I can't just not show up! It could be Voldemort!" As Harry spoke, Ron stood next to Harry and took his left hand, an unspoken request to be taken along by Apparation rather than by the phoenixes. Fawkes and Flora disappeared.

"Harry, it's a trap! He just said so! Look, go to the Aurors, tell Kingsley—"

"Good idea," he agreed, and Disapparated, taking Ron with him; the instant before he disappeared, he saw McGonagall

appear with Flora in the classroom.

Harry and Ron had barely arrived at the detection room when their pendants went off, with the alarm that indicated an all-out alert. The room was a whirl of activity, with a dozen Aurors rushing in, and more than a dozen more Apparating in over the next few seconds. Still holding Ron's hand, Harry took in the information from the wall, and quickly Disapparated.

He and Ron Apparated into a lightly wooded area; it looked like the same place where they had caught the last Death Eater to end the Apparation crisis in the summer. The scene was chaotic: spells were flying through the air, Aurors were Apparating in, and a half dozen Aurors were on the ground, dead or unconscious. A quick glance told Harry that there were about fifty adversaries, but from their robes, most weren't Death Eaters. He looked around to see who needed protection from Killing Curses, and started putting them up.

A second later, Hermione and Neville were rushing at him. "Harry, look out!" shouted Hermione. Something seemed wrong with her voice, but he couldn't place it right away. Hermione and Neville plowed into him and Ron, knocking them to the ground. Harry felt himself losing consciousness rapidly, and barely had time to wonder why. Over Hermione's shoulder, he looked up to see Flora suddenly appear, carrying Hermione and Neville. Harry lost consciousness as he was Disapparated away.

As Harry struggled for consciousness, the first thing he was aware of was the memory flashing through his mind. He saw himself talking to Dumbledore and Snape in the middle of the night, Dumbledore explaining the Cleansing, and how he hoped Harry would help Snape. After a minute, the scene changed, and he was remembering his first energy-of-love

session with the Aurors. As that memory played through his mind, he slowly returned to consciousness, and slowly became aware of his situation. He was lying on his back, legs straight, arms at his sides. They must have done the Full-Body Bind on me, he thought. He flexed a pinky to see if he could move; he could, so he concluded it must have worn off.

Eyes still closed, he remembered what had happened just before he lost consciousness, and he suddenly knew with certainty that he was with Voldemort, a captive. But why no ropes? he wondered. Why just a Full-Body Bind that's worn off? He became aware of a few other things: a sound, the sound of an engine, which he had heard once before, in the planes he had boarded in September. The floor rocked slightly; he realized he was on a plane. He also realized that Voldemort was doing Legilimens on him, viewing memories. Oh, no, he thought, Snape is blown. His next thought was, why hasn't he noticed I've woken up? He thought that Voldemort would notice mentally, if not by Harry's movements. But Voldemort didn't notice; he went on to a different memory, one of Harry discussing with Kingsley the restrictions against killing for those who wanted to learn the energy of love.

I can move, thought Harry, and he doesn't know I can. What should I do? The Imperius Charm? No, he'd just disappear... the device! I have to find it! Deciding to take a chance, he opened his eyes as little as he could manage. The first thing he saw was Voldemort's torso; clearly he was lying on his side, very close to Harry. Harry opened his eyes a little wider, and saw that they were in a very small, enclosed space; he guessed that in all, it was probably a little bit longer, wider, and higher than a coffin, but not much. He realized the reason immediately: people couldn't Apparate onto moving objects, which was the reason for the plane, and a phoenix

wouldn't be able to appear into such a small space. Voldemort had gone to a lot of trouble to see that they weren't disturbed.

As the memory Voldemort was watching continued, Harry looked around more, and saw on Voldemort's wrist a thick, silver bracelet. That has to be it, he thought. He knew he would have only one chance, that Voldemort could probably incapacitate him quickly if he failed. He had a last-second, absurd thought before he acted: If this turns out to be just a bracelet, I'm going to feel pretty stupid. He focused all his energy on a Severing Charm, and raising his right hand quickly, brought it down, imagining himself chopping something hard with a heavy knife. Voldemort's hand instantly separated from his wrist, and the bracelet fell off.

Voldemort screamed and lurched upwards, hitting his head on the top of the container they were in, as blood spurted onto Harry's hands, torso, then face, as Voldemort thrashed about in pain and shock. Rolling onto his side quickly, Harry snatched Voldemort's wand away, and in one quick motion, performed the Imperius Charm. Unlike Snape and Malfoy, Voldemort went unconscious instantly. In the same instant, Harry felt his hand being burned; he felt as if he were holding a red-hot poker rather than a wand. He dropped it immediately, then looked at his hand. The skin was raw and burned in exactly the places he had been holding the wand.

Grimacing in pain, he considered what to do next. Where was his wand? Probably not on the plane, he thought. Think, he told himself. Can I get out of this... whatever it is we're in? There were holes in the sides for air, but the top was solid. He pushed against it with his left hand, but it didn't move. He wished Fawkes could get in and take him away, but he realized that that was the whole point of such a confined space.

Can I even do anything to him? Harry wondered. Without a wand, there's nothing I can do... oh, wait, I might be able to do Legilimens, sometimes you do that without a wand. It's worth a try...

Harry focused hard, and easily gained access to Voldemort's unconscious mind. He called up recent memories, and saw Voldemort crawling into the compartment after the Death Eater masquerading as Hermione had crawled out, the plane engines already running. Voldemort moved Harry into a certain position, did the Full-Body Bind, then placed a Confundus Beam next to Harry's head and turned it on. Ah, so that's why he thought I'd never be able to do anything, Harry thought, he thought I couldn't even if I woke up. Didn't he know I had that artifact I took from that assassin? Maybe the assassin hadn't told him about it.

Harry saw Voldemort begin to view memories; conscious of how little time he might have, he skipped ahead. He reached a point at which Voldemort had found most of the important information: Snape's spying, the prophecy, Dumbledore's assistance in rendering Voldemort unconscious, how Harry taught the energy of love, and the nature of the Imperius Charm. He saw Voldemort decide to kill him, raise his wand... and suddenly go unconscious. The memory continued when Voldemort regained consciousness. Harry saw Voldemort in tremendous fear, truly realizing and believing for the first time that Dumbledore had a purpose for dying. Making an impulsive decision, Voldemort suddenly pointed the wand at Harry, as if he could kill Harry by acting too fast for Dumbledore to stop him. Voldemort went unconscious again.

The next thing Harry felt Voldemort feel, upon awakening, was terror, almost paralyzing fear. Voldemort realized that Dumbledore could make him unconscious whenever he wanted, and there was nothing he could do to stop

Dumbledore. Or was there? He resolved to research methods of fending off supernatural attacks, if there were any. Or he would create one, but one way or the other, Dumbledore would be stopped. Harry saw, however, an even deeper fear strike Voldemort: that he had been wrong in not believing in an afterlife. Voldemort wasn't convinced that there was one, but clearly for the first time, he was seriously entertaining the possibility. Harry couldn't understand why Voldemort feared such a thought so much, and couldn't find out by viewing the memory.

Next, Harry watched as Voldemort adjusted the bracelet; Harry understood that Voldemort was activating it, so that the next time he went unconscious, he would be transported away. Harry didn't have time to wonder why he had switched it off in the first place; by viewing the memory, he understood immediately. The device subjected Voldemort to the same restrictions as Apparating: he could not Apparate from a moving object to the ground, so he would have to be transported somewhere in midair. He would then have to be caught by someone on a broom at the proper place, and while Voldemort was sure of his helpers' loyalty, he preferred not to trust them with his life unless there was simply no other option. He had deactivated the bracelet as a precaution, in case Harry could do his spell even while under the influence of the Confundus Beam; he preferred to wake up in the same place and kill Harry when he did. After Dumbledore made him unconscious twice in a row, however, Voldemort realized that both had happened just before he had tried to kill Harry. He decided not to try again to kill Harry, but wait for the plane to land, and have one of his Death Eaters do it. He activated the bracelet in fear that Dumbledore might continue rendering him unconscious whether he tried to kill Harry or not, and he didn't want to risk the Confundus Beam giving out. Harry felt Voldemort's fury, his feeling of impotence. In enclosed quarters with a

wandless and defenseless seventeen-year-old, he couldn't kill him, and was in fact in danger himself. Voldemort's next thought was a dawning realization, that...

Voldemort started to stir, and Harry forced his concentration away from what he was watching, withdrawing from Voldemort's mind. This is going to hurt, he thought grimly. Using material from his robes to protect his hand at first-like taking something out of the oven with an oven mitt, he thought-he then grabbed it with his right hand just long enough to do the Imperius Charm again, then dropped it, howling in pain, as Voldemort went unconscious again. Thank God burns heal well with magic, thought Harry; enough of this, and my hand's not going to have any skin left. As he glanced at the wand, he also noticed that a part of Voldemort's robe was drenched in blood, and that blood was still coming out of his wrist. He wondered whether Voldemort might die of blood loss, but decided he shouldn't worry about that one way or the other, but continue doing what he was doing.

Harry cast Legilimens again, and tried to find the same memory he had been viewing when Voldemort had awakened. It took him a half a minute to do so. He felt Voldemort realize that there was a possibility that Harry could do even more damage than he had so far. Voldemort thought about the phrase from the prophecy, 'He will mark him as his equal,' suggesting that any power that Voldemort had, Harry would have it, or its equivalent. Voldemort wondered whether Harry could use what he called love-all evidence to the contrary, Voldemort still thought that what Harry used was simply another kind of power, not love-to do something equivalent to the Cleansing? Is that how I'm being rendered unconscious? Harry saw Voldemort wonder.

Harry gasped in sudden realization; in an instant, he knew. He knew what he was going to do, how he was going to defeat Voldemort. I can do the Cleansing, only with love instead, he thought. His mind is as if it's been Cleansed, like he did it himself, which is why he can't tolerate love. If I do a reverse Cleansing on him, his mind won't be able to tolerate evil, rather than love. He takes off every time love invades his mind; after I do this, if I can, evil won't be able to stay there, like love can't now. He might end up as Tom Riddle, or insane, or comatose, but when I'm done with him, whatever it is that makes him Voldemort won't be able to survive in his mind.

But can I really do it? he asked himself. How do I do it? He realized at once that the answer to that question was another question: How does Voldemort do the Cleansing? With a new sense of urgency, he cast Legilimens on Voldemort again. He had to know exactly what was involved. He searched for Voldemort's memory of having done the Cleansing on Snape, and started viewing. After a minute, distracted by Snape's screaming in the memory, he started again from the beginning. He tried to focus only on what Voldemort was doing, how he saw Snape's mind, what he looked for, exactly what he did when. He felt as though he were trying to learn surgery by watching, but he knew there was nothing else he could do.

Concentrating intently, he watched for ten minutes, taking in every detail he could. He tried to ignore how sickened he felt, watching what Snape was being put through, how Voldemort enjoyed doing what he was doing. He felt Voldemort feel that he was doing Snape a favor as well as making him a useful tool. After ten minutes, Harry felt that he more or less knew what Voldemort did, but was still no nearer knowing exactly how to do the opposite. Was it just a matter of calling up the same memories Voldemort did, then

doing the same thing with love that Voldemort did with pain? Can I do it without a wand? Well, let's give it a try, he thought.

He focused on calling up a memory of love, but after a minute of trying, had found nothing. This is going to be harder than I thought, he thought dejectedly. Does he really have no memories of love whatsoever? Or are they just buried so deeply that I can't get at them? He decided to try for happiness instead, pure happiness not derived from someone else's suffering. He searched for another minute, then found a memory from early childhood; a kind word and a hug from a woman at the orphanage. Harry tried to apply love as Voldemort had applied pain, but nothing seemed to happen. Does he have to be conscious for this to work? wondered Harry. Worse yet, does he have to consent? Albus said that consent was necessary for the Cleansing, could it be the same for this? No, it can't be, he told himself. This is what I have to do, I know it. I'll be able to do it without his consent.

Harry paused for a few seconds, then decided to try again. He called up the same memory, then concentrated hard on love, on imprinting it into Voldemort's mind. He imagined that the first step would be the hardest, but once there was a tiny spot in Voldemort's mind that could handle love, he could work from there to spread it around the rest of Voldemort's mind. He continued for another thirty seconds; suddenly, Voldemort let out a deafening scream, worse than Harry had ever heard. In the middle of the scream, with a popping noise, he Disapparated.

"Dammit!" yelled Harry, pounding the bottom of the container with his fist, then howling in pain again as he had somehow forgotten about the burns on his hand. You moron, he said to himself. How did he do that? I guess, like the thing

with kids, it can happen automatically when you're in a dire situation. That probably hurt him as badly as anything has in many years, maybe even worse than when his Curse backfired. He's going to be terrified of me now. Good.

What now, he thought. He looked around the container, and saw three things: Voldemort's wand, Voldemort's bracelet... and Voldemort's dismembered hand. I should take all three, he thought, even though the idea disgusted him; he knew the hand could possibly be used against Voldemort in some way, though he had little idea how. He would definitely take the bracelet, and as for the wand... he dreaded the thought of using it again, but he knew he couldn't get away without it. The alternative would be to wait until the plane landed, where there would be Death Eaters meeting it. I still have some skin somewhere on that hand, he thought with dark humor.

Again using material from his robes to cover his hand at first, he gingerly picked up the wand. To his surprise, it felt cool. He quickly touched it with his bare hand, then finally held it firmly between his thumb and pinky, the only parts of his right hand not badly burned. Holding it caused great pain from having to move the hand at all, but not from the wand. Finally, he conjured a thick white cloth; the wand's temperature didn't change. "Sure, now you don't burn me," he said to the wand. "I could have used this five minutes ago." Taking the wand in his left hand and hoping it didn't decide to heat up again, he levitated the hand and the bracelet onto the cloth, wrapped it, and put it into his robes.

He then Disapparated to a spot a few thousand feet above the plane, just to be safe, since he didn't know its altitude. Falling, he saw Fawkes appear a second later, falling with him. He put Voldemort's wand inside his robes and grabbed Fawkes's tail, being careful to do it with his left hand rather

than his right, as he usually did. Fawkes helped him decelerate. When he had fully decelerated, he asked Fawkes to take him to wherever Ginny was.

He was suddenly a few inches from the floor of the standby area, next to the Aurors' Apparation detection room. "Harry!" shrieked Ginny, leaping to her feet and hugging him hard. He hugged her back gratefully, again protecting his right hand, making sure it touched nothing. She kissed him quickly, then hugged him again. When she finally let him go, he saw that they were surrounded by his other four friends, McGonagall, and Kingsley, with a dozen Aurors further back.

McGonagall had an expression of deep concern. "Are you all right? That blood..."

Harry had forgotten that he had been liberally splashed with blood; now that he thought about it, he realized there was some on his glasses. "It's his. Well, it's mine, really, but it came from him. He's all right too, unfortunately, but..." He reached into his robes with his left hand and pulled out the cloth, handing it to Kingsley. "I thought this might be useful, but you'll know what to do with it better than me."

Kingsley, seeing that some red had stained the cloth, opened it gingerly. When he exposed the hand, the bracelet around the stump, there was a collective gasp. Kingsley looked at Harry in astonishment, Ron and Neville's mouths dropped open, and Hermione made a noise that sounded like a squeak. After a few seconds, Ron managed, "I, um, I see you figured out a way to get the device off."

From behind Harry, Snape spoke. "That is all well and good, Professor," he said as Harry turned to look at him. "But, where is the rest of him?"

Leave it to Snape to put it that way, thought Harry. "The bad news is, the rest of him got away. But the good news is, I think I know how I'm going to beat him."

"Wrong," said Ginny firmly, as Harry turned back to look at her. "The good news is, you're alive and well. The rest is just icing on the cake."

He smiled at her, his first smile for quite a while. "Come on, I need to tell you what happened. Kingsley, where should we do it?"

"The main meeting room, it should seat all of us. You six, me, Professors Snape and McGonagall... and if you don't mind, Harry, I'd like to get the Minister here too, let him hear this firsthand."

"Sure, that's fine," agreed Harry. "Let's go." He started for the conference room, his friends right behind. On his right side, Ginny happily took his right hand, squeezing it firmly. Harry screamed in pain, startling most everyone in the room.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, let me see," said Ginny, mortified to have caused him such pain. "Let me... oh, Harry, why in the world didn't you say anything?" she asked in disbelief. "You have to get that taken care of right now! That looks awful!"

"It's no fun," he agreed. "But I need to tell you about this right away, it could have time value. I don't know if it will, just that it could. Just don't touch my hand, and it'll be all right for a while."

McGonagall walked over and took his right arm by the wrist to look at his hand, and winced. "Yes, I'm sure it will be fine," she said dryly. "I will get someone from St. Mungo's. Kingsley, may I..."

He nodded, and she Disapparated. The six continued walking to the conference room; along the way, Harry took out Voldemort's wand and Summoned his own. He knew it probably wouldn't arrive for a while, but was confident that it would. "I want to ask you all kinds of questions, but I know they'll be answered when you tell the story," said Ginny. "Thank goodness for the phoenixes."

Harry glanced at her in surprise, since they hadn't been able to help him, except at the end. "She means, because they kept us informed about your emotional state," explained Hermione. "We knew that you were unconscious for a while, that was when we were most worried; Ginny kept staring at her hand. Then I got a message from Albus, through the phoenixes; he said that you would need to concentrate, and that I shouldn't try to send you messages through Fawkes and Flora, and Ginny shouldn't look at her hand."

"It was really hard," said Ginny, and Harry knew it was an understatement.

"I got two bursts of pain, which I assume was when your hand got like that," continued Hermione as Harry nodded. "Near the end, I got a strong sense of... I guess you could say, revelation, like you finally understood something, something about Voldemort. I'll be very interested to hear what it is."

They entered the conference room. The table was a circle that seated twelve, so they all sat next to each other. "What happened at the site, where I got taken from?"

Neville looked somber. "Six Aurors responded to the call, as usual. You saw how many were waiting there, all using Killing Curses. Five of the six were killed."

"Oh, God," said Harry, in deep sorrow. Ginny reached over for his hand, then backed away at the last second, remembering, and gripped his forearm instead. "That's horrible. But I'm almost surprised it wasn't all six."

"The sixth was Winston," said Neville. "He put up a Killing Curse shield. He had no idea that he could do it until that moment."

Harry knew he would be extremely pleased under different circumstances. "Hell of a way to find out."

"That's exactly what he said," said Neville. "But yeah, this is really bad. That many Aurors haven't died at once for a very long time. Now we're down to thirty-three, not including us." Harry noticed that it was the first time that Neville had referred to the Aurors as 'we.' He obviously felt the deaths very strongly as well.

"But there were no more deaths after I was taken?"

"No, by then we had shields, and better numbers," said Neville. "All five of us were putting up shields like crazy, and we started winning the battle pretty quickly. The attackers started getting away, either by Disapparating or using Portkeys; we think they had a whole bunch set up before the thing started. We ended up capturing about twenty of them. Kingsley's talked to a few of them, and apparently a lot have American accents." No surprise, thought Harry.

Snape soon entered, followed shortly by Kingsley and Bright, who approached Harry. "Harry, I'm very glad to hear..." He extended a hand as he spoke, and trailed off because Harry held up his right hand to explain why he didn't shake Bright's. "...that you're largely all right," finished Bright, clearly taken aback by what he saw.

"It..." Harry chuckled at what he had been about to say. "I was going to say it's not as bad as it looks, but that would be a lie, it's pretty painful. It's just that I know it's fairly easily fixable."

"Yes, it's not as though you lost your hand entirely," joked Neville.

"He can just make himself another one," responded Harry.

McGonagall and an older woman in green Healer's robes entered the room. "Harry, this is Healer Haspberg, she is the senior Healer, and an old friend."

Harry nodded to her. "Professor," she said, kneeling next to his chair and taking his right wrist. "Oh, dear. How did this happen?" She cast a spell, and his hand suddenly felt much less pain.

"Voldemort's wand," said Harry. "For some reason, until he was gone, it burned my hand badly both times I tried to use it, like it was on fire."

"An uncommon defensive Dark Arts spell," remarked Snape. "The wand will burn the hand of anyone who tries to use it against its owner." Ah, that's why I was able to use it after Voldemort got away, thought Harry. "You are the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, you should have known that."

"Albus did tell me that he didn't hire me for my encyclopedic knowledge of the topic," countered Harry, mildly annoyed at Snape. "But I'll be sure to mention it in my classes from now on. 'Don't try to use Voldemort's wand against him.'"

Everyone was in a chair except Haspberg, who was working on Harry's hand. "You may begin, Professor," said

McGonagall.

"Obviously, I don't know much that happened until I woke up," began Harry. "Apparently they Apparated me to the inside of a small container inside a plane, which took off shortly after they put me in it, and Voldemort went in there with me. When I woke up, memories were flashing through my head. I think he had been doing it for at least twenty minutes." He looked at Snape sadly, knowing how it would affect him. "I'm sorry, Professor, but he knows about you now."

Everyone looked at Snape, who seemed to be making a supreme effort to hold his emotions in check, and barely succeeding. "I feared as much," he said quietly and bitterly. "I feared that your stupidity would cost us dearly, and I was correct."

"Professor!" said McGonagall reprovingly.

Her reprimand only seemed to anger Snape further. "He warned you!" he shouted at Harry. "The headmaster warned you that it was a trap, but you went anyway! She asked you not to go," Snape gestured to Hermione, "and you mocked her! They are the two people whose opinion you hold in the highest regard, and you completely ignored them both, because after all, you are Harry Potter, nothing could possibly ever happen to you—"

"That's not the reason, and you know it!" responded Harry in what was almost a shout. Trying to keep his voice level, he continued, "I can't ignore those alarms, they mean Aurors are in danger—"

"You can ignore them if you are warned that there is a trap for you!" shouted Snape. "That is the whole point of the words 'warning' and 'trap!' I said that your vocabulary was

deficient, but I did not dream the problem was this bad," he added, dripping venom and sarcasm. Bright and Kingsley exchanged glances, apparently wondering about Snape's stability.

Before Harry could respond, McGonagall spoke. "Professor Snape! This is not the time for a discussion of the appropriateness of Professor Potter's actions, not to mention insults. Now, please hold your tongue unless you have something pertinent to contribute." Seething with anger, Snape stared at her, but said nothing. Harry felt angry with Snape, but could understand why Snape was so angry.

"Um, anyway," said a discomfited Harry, "He knows everything now: the prophecy, the relays, everything I know. Including the fact that I had no idea how I was going to defeat him."

Harry went on to describe the rest of what had happened. When he got to the point where he used the Imperius Charm on Voldemort and started using Legilimens on him, Snape interrupted. "Forgive me for asking a stupid question," he sneered, "but why did you not at this point simply kill him?"

"How?" responded an annoyed Harry. "I didn't have a wand I could use—"

"You could have simply strangled him," pointed out Snape. "You put your hands around the person's neck, and squeeze as hard as you can. I would be happy to demonstrate the procedure—"

"Professor Snape," warned McGonagall.

"Even with that wand... I would hold onto a red-hot wand for as long as it took to kill the Dark Lord," continued Snape with anger and intensity, "until the hand was a lump of dead

flesh. I would have thought you would too, even if it were your precious left hand."

"Hey!" shouted Ginny, leaping to her feet.

"Leave her out of this!" shouted Harry, now truly angry.
"Look, you knew this already, that I couldn't kill him--"

"You mean 'wouldn't,' not 'couldn't,' corrected Snape. "And you did not even have to kill him! You could have held onto him, Disapparated out, and brought him back here!"

"The wand--"

"Would only burn your hand if you were using it against him, which you would not have been."

"I didn't know--"

"Of course not," sneered Snape. "But even so, you could have held onto it for long enough to Disapparate."

"You said last year there can be magical defenses against being involuntarily--"

"You could have checked, using Legilimens!"

"Voldemort could have woken up in the meantime--"

"That was not the reason you didn't do it! The reason is that you didn't think of it! Tell me that's not true!" Harry gave Snape a look of smoldering anger, but said nothing. "I thought as much," continued Snape derisively. "That should be what it says on your tombstone. 'Here lies Harry Potter. He didn't think.' It's Grindelwald all over again."

Hermione wheeled on Snape, furious, as Harry could see the rest of his friends were getting. "That is so unfair, and such a

totally different situation—"

"Hermione," interrupted McGonagall. Turning to Snape, quietly and very seriously, she said, "Professor, I understand what this means for you. I am trying to be tolerant, and I can see that Harry is too. But you will act appropriately, or you will be asked to leave." Harry saw the look Snape gave McGonagall in response, and wondered whether Snape could keep it together. Harry tried to calm himself, and after a half a minute, continued.

Sighing, he said, "Much as I hate to admit it, Professor Snape was right about one thing. I didn't consider the possibility of using the wand for just as long as it took to Disapparate us both out of there. Once the wand started burning my hand like that, I just didn't think of it as something I could use."

"Harry, from early childhood, we are taught not to touch or grab very hot things, both by our parents and by experience," said Bright reassuringly, with a quick, annoyed glance at Snape. "That you thought that way is... extremely understandable." Snape scoffed silently, but made no noise.

Harry found that he didn't feel any better; Bright was a politician, and didn't truly understand such things. He turned to Kingsley. "If I was an Auror, you would tell me that I made a mistake." With a look, he requested that Kingsley not hold back in his answer.

Kingsley gave a small nod as he answered. "I think you know that to us, you are an Auror. Both of you," he added, with a quick glance at Neville. Compassion in his eyes, Kingsley continued, "And yes, it was what we call a mental error. But it's not as though Aurors don't make them. We recognize them, we note them, we learn from them, and we do not dwell on them. We move on. An Auror who looks back at the

past too long is one whose attention isn't on the present and future, where it belongs."

Harry appreciated Kingsley's honesty, and found that what Kingsley said had made him feel better than what Bright had said. "Anyway, by doing Legilimens on him, I found out what had happened until then. He had tried to kill me twice, and Albus had done his thing to him both times. Voldemort started to wake up, and I had to grab the wand to put him out again." Harry saw Ron and Pansy wince in sympathy. "When I did Legilimens on him next--"

"Excuse me, I'm sorry to interrupt," said Haspberg. "I've done as much as can be done with your hand, Professor. It is now in a field which extends a half an inch from all injured parts of your hand; your hand will get a small shock if it gets that close to anything. This is to remind you not to use your hand in any way. The field will decrease in intensity as your hand heals; you should be able to use it again in two days. Please come to St. Mungo's tomorrow for another check. Can you do that?"

"I'll drag him if I have to," answered Ginny for him.

"Don't worry, he'll be there," added Hermione.

"Their job is to protect me, but also from myself, apparently," joked Harry.

"Somebody has to," retorted Ginny.

"Anyway, it feels much better, thank you very much," said Harry to Haspberg.

She nodded her acknowledgment, and left, with a nod of thanks from McGonagall. "Where was I... Oh, yes. I did Legilimens on him again, and I found that after he woke up

the second time, he had this overwhelming fear. A fear of the unknown, of something he had absolutely no control over. It was like, his worst nightmare had come true. Then I saw him think something that made the light bulb go on over my head. He had seen the prophecy, the part about my being his equal. He wondered if I'd be able to do something like the Cleansing, and I suddenly realized-

"I'm sorry, Harry," interrupted Bright. "The what?"

"It's this thing that Voldemort does-

"Professor!" said Snape loudly in warning.

Harry looked to McGonagall for support. "I have to explain it, Professor. It has to do with how I think I'm going to beat him, but it won't make any sense unless I explain the Cleansing." McGonagall hesitated, then gestured for him to continue. Very frustrated, Snape again managed not to speak.

Harry explained the Cleansing, to the horrified looks of those who had never heard about it; he thought he saw most people sneak glances at Snape, making the correct conclusions about him and the reasons for his usual behavior. "So, obviously the Imperius Charm is very different from the Cleansing, but it's not impossible that I could do something like that. Who knows, maybe it would make the person completely happy, never able to have a negative emotion. I don't know; obviously, I wouldn't even think about changing someone permanently that way. But it made me think of something. The way he is, it's like he did the Cleansing to himself. I thought, maybe I could do-

"A Cleansing in reverse!" interrupted Hermione, gaping. "Oh, my God! That could work! You wouldn't have to kill him, it's consistent with the energy of love, and he would end up... harmless."

McGonagall was astonished at the idea. "Do you really think it could work?"

"I didn't know," he replied, "but I decided that I had to find out; I didn't know how much time I had, but I knew that I might not get the chance again. I did Legilimency on him, watching him very closely, do the Cleansing to someone. It wasn't pleasant," he added in an aside. "Then I decided to try my idea on him. At first it didn't work, then I tried again; I tried to imprint love in there, as hard as I could. After a minute, he just let out this awful, terrible scream, and Disapparated. Without a wand. The scream was... amazing, it was as if I had wounded him horribly."

"You did," said Snape, anger gone, looking thoughtful. "You inflicted a wound on him that is nearly debilitating, worse than he would have imagined could have been done. If I were a wagering person, I would wager everything I own that as we speak, he is still screaming in pain, that he has not stopped since he escaped you."

Harry looked around the table, and saw amazement on everyone's faces. "He will repair himself, though it may take some time," continued Snape. "But Professor Potter is correct; what he suggests will be effective, if he can do it. The problem is, of course, incapacitating him for long enough to do it. It would be far easier to simply kill him."

"The energy of love giveth, and it taketh away," commented Kingsley. "Maybe Harry can't kill, but he couldn't have done a tenth of what he has if not for the energy of love." With a stern glance at Snape, he added, "There are limitations it puts on him, and if not killing is one of them, we have to accept that."

"Or, he can bring us the Dark Lord unconscious, and we can kill him," said Snape. "I am certain there would be no shortage of volunteers."

"Especially after today," agreed Kingsley grimly. "But if Harry has the opportunity to do this, I'm not so sure I'd tell him not to bother. The only reason Voldemort got away was that Harry wasn't able to put down an anti-Disapparation field. If he tries to move Voldemort, it increases the chances that he could get away. If Harry can keep him in the same place and do this to him, it may be worth doing."

"There's another reason to, I think," added Harry. "If we just killed him, who's to say he'd really die? He didn't last time. He just hovered around, and came back. He might manage to do it again someday. I think this may be the reason the prophecy uses the word 'vanquish' instead of 'kill.' Maybe killing him isn't enough, maybe the only way to truly defeat him is to do this."

"Excuse me, Harry," said Bright. "I am not familiar with the entire prophecy. Now that Voldemort knows it, do you think it is safe..."

Harry looked at McGonagall. "I'd think it is. After all, nothing in it is any surprise by now, it's kind of obvious." She thought for a few seconds, and gestured her assent. He recited it; when he was finished, he commented, "If he'd known this all along, he might have put a greater priority on killing me much earlier, and probably would have succeeded. The part about my being his equal would have made him worry. Now, this is all pretty much stuff we know; it's all come true."

"The first serious evidence of it was when you came up with the Cruciatus Curse shield," mused Hermione aloud.

Snape gave a sudden start. He wore an awed expression, a look that Harry had never seen on him before. "Professor Potter... a thought has just occurred to me. You are not sure exactly how to do this... reverse Cleansing. You should practice it."

Harry's mouth slowly dropped open, as did those of the others who understood what Snape was suggesting. "Are you crazy?" asked Harry in disbelief. "Do you know what this could do to you? I don't even know! I barely know how I would do it!"

"You achieved a significant result with the Dark Lord, in a short period of time," pointed out Snape.

"Yes, and he's probably screaming in pain right now!" responded Harry. "Doesn't that tell you something?"

"Only that you started the procedure, but did not finish it," said Snape. "If you do what I suggest, you would learn valuable lessons that you could apply to the Dark Lord, if and when you do it to him."

"I'm sorry to interrupt again," said Bright, "but I keep feeling that there are too many things of which I'm not aware..."

"Not only you, mate," said Ron sympathetically. Suddenly realizing what he'd said, he amended, "Er, sorry, Minister." Harry exchanged a quick grin with Hermione.

"Quite all right, Ron," said Bright, amused. "Harry, what exactly is Professor Snape suggesting you do?"

"You've probably all guessed by now that the Cleansing was done to him, many years ago," explained Harry. "He basically wants me to undo it, put him back the way he was." To Snape, he said, "Look, I know you've wanted this for a long

time, ever since you went to Dumbledore seventeen years ago. I'm not saying I couldn't do it, someday. But now, it's just an idea." Enunciating every word and speaking slowly, he continued, "I... don't... know... what... I'm... doing! Anything could happen! You could end up dead, or in a coma, or..."

"Or, like his parents?" asked Snape, gesturing at Neville; Harry was surprised that Snape had accurately guessed what he was going to say. "I'm perfectly willing to take the chance—"

"Watch what you say about my parents!" said Neville sharply. Despite Neville's having lost most of his shyness, it greatly surprised Harry to see Neville talk that way to Snape, whom he had long feared. Harry knew, of course, that Neville was very sensitive to any disrespect to his parents.

"Or what, you'll unleash your potty mouth on me?" smirked Snape.

"I'll unleash more than that on you, if you're not careful!" shouted Neville.

"Such as us, for one thing," put in Kingsley, his tone a warning. "The Aurors, Professor, would strongly prefer that you did not speak of Frank and Alice with anything but the utmost respect." Kingsley finished the sentence there, but Harry was sure he understood the additional, unspoken, "if you get my drift."

Snape rolled his eyes, suggesting that he didn't care about the Longbottoms one way or the other. "As I was saying, I will take the chance. You must do this."

"I'd rather wait until I've done it to Voldemort—"

"I will not last that long!!" shouted Snape, almost as angry as he'd been over finding out about Blaise and the other boy. "This is you, not thinking again! It is, again, because of your stupidity, your lack of thinking, that my usefulness to the Order has ended. It was difficult enough to endure what I did, for the sake of being useful against the Dark Lord. You know how difficult it was, better than anyone except the headmaster. That was with the enormous incentive of being able to contribute to the Dark Lord's downfall. Now, there is simply nothing I can do. Even if I tried to make the effort to continue for the sake of continuing, I would fail. I know that. I cannot wait months for you to become skilled enough to do it, or even days. You... must... do... it... now!" he finished, mocking Harry's earlier way of speaking.

Harry hated to admit it to himself, but he hadn't thought about Snape's ability to hold on when considering the question. He loathed the idea that he might inadvertently cause Snape harm, or permanent disability, but who was he to tell Snape that he had to wait, to endure what he did indefinitely? Not to mention that his actions since finding out he could no longer be a spy supported the idea that he could not hold on. Still, he felt there was one more thing that he had to know before he could agree.

"I won't lie, I'm afraid of what could happen, that I have that kind of responsibility," said Harry quietly. "But at least, we have to wait a day. I have to talk to the other one, make sure this is what he wants too. He's a part of this."

Snape looked incredulous, as if he'd never heard anything so stupid in his life. "Are you insane?" he nearly shrieked. "He is me, I am him! We are the same entity; that is the whole point, the crux of the problem! You said yourself once, people were not meant to live like this! Even if he didn't want to, I wouldn't care! It's all very well for him, with the

headmaster and Longbottom's parents and the whole gang in their little paradise, while I have to suffer down here! He does not have a say in this!"

Ron, Neville, Pansy, Kingsley, and Bright looked baffled; Hermione looked at Harry with regret. "I hate to say it, but he's right. The other one's going to say the same thing, you know he will. Not that I'm saying you have to do it today, though. It's probably better to wait a day, what with all you've been through today."

"Oh, yes, let's wait for poor Harry to recover from his ordeal," said Snape with unnecessary sarcasm. "Everyone can pat him on the back, tell him what a great job he did. Hugs all around from the friends, maybe a trip to his quarters so—"

"Professor!" barked McGonagall, now glaring at Snape. Harry started to wonder if Snape could literally wait until tomorrow; his tone suggested that he was becoming more unbalanced by the minute. Harry found that he was no longer angry with Snape, even given all he'd said, but felt sorry for him. It's easy for me to forget how hard this is for him, Harry thought. Here he just had his biggest emotional blow in sixteen years; the thing he based his life around is gone. Now there's the possibility that his suffering could end, and I'm all wishy-washy because I'm afraid I might hurt him. It's probably just more than he can tolerate.

Harry sighed. "I'll do it tomorrow. I want a chance to talk to Albus and the other one, maybe they can tell me something that'll help me. I want a chance to think about what I'm going to do, anyway. This is going to be really tricky, and—"

"Headmaster!" shouted Snape, looking slightly up, over everyone's heads. "Will you tell him, please, that the other

one does not mind, and that there is no reason that he cannot do it today, as soon as possible?"

There was a silence, as everyone was somewhat uncomfortable. After a half a minute, Harry got a few images. Hermione caught his eye and nodded, letting him know that she'd gotten them too, through Flora. "The other one doesn't mind," she said. "But, Albus says, tomorrow. The sun setting, once."

Snape closed his eyes and grimaced, then stood and quickly strode from the room. After a second, McGonagall stood. Looking at Bright and Kingsley, she said, "Someone should be with him, and unfortunately, that someone is me. Excuse me." She left the room; Harry wondered whether she would catch up with him by the time he reached the fireplace.

In the silence that followed, Ron said, "I must say, I've learned things I never would have imagined I would before I sat down here."

"Not only you, mate," said Bright with a small grin. Ron smiled back, obviously pleased that the Minister had shared a joke with him. "May I ask, in case I'm the only one here who doesn't know, who is 'the other one?'"

"It was a secret, but you know so much at this point, it would be silly not to tell you the rest," said Harry. "It started the night Albus died, the first time he talked to me..."

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 17, Awake in the Dark: Harry faces a long night with the weight of his mistake and the responsibility for Snape's well-being hanging over him.

From Chapter 17: I'm scared, he sent, the thought that he was communicating things he would never say verbally flashing through his mind for a second. Scared of what might happen tomorrow with Snape, scared of who might die next, more scared than you knew I was. People wouldn't have confidence in me if they knew how scared I was.

17. Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Awake in the Dark

"I still don't believe it," said Ron.

Four hours later, after dinner, the six were in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, on the conjured carpet. After leaving the meeting with Bright, Kingsley, and the others, Harry had gone to his Hogwarts quarters, to shower and change. Fawkes had then brought Ginny, just so they could spend some time quietly together. Then he had gone to the staff room after five o'clock, where he jokingly apologized to Dentus for having missed his class. Dentus accepted in good humor, explaining that "since they knew you were in serious danger, nobody was paying attention anyway." Harry then put in an appearance in Gryffindor Tower, apologetically answering questions as vaguely as possible, since it was up to McGonagall and Kingsley what aspects of what had happened to make public. Then, the six had had a quiet dinner together.

"Don't believe what, exactly?" asked Ginny.

"The thing with Snape. All of it. Any of it. Him viewing your memories, that you had to tolerate him maybe seeing the ones with you and Ginny... you having to be in the same room with him that much, never mind, care about him. Just the whole thing. I mean, you've done stuff that's impressed me before, Harry, but nothing so much as this. I stand in awe."

"You're sitting," pointed out Pansy.

"Then I sit in awe," amended Ron, unperturbed, "and if I lay back against you, like this, that will be in awe also."

"So, generally, you're awed," observed Neville.

"That's the gist of it," agreed Ron. "I mean, to have to think that you have no privacy whatsoever... I just couldn't do that. If Dumbledore had asked me that, I'd have said, sorry, mate, you're out of luck. That's just too much."

"You had me rummage around in your mind," recalled Harry. "That's not that different."

"Yes, except for the huge, enormous difference that it was you, not Snape," said Ron. "That's what makes what you did so impressive. Sometimes it bothered me that there was this big thing that you three knew and I didn't, but now, I think I'm just as glad I didn't know. Would've got too worked up on your behalf, both of you. Funny, I've always given you two a hard time about doing stuff. Hard to resist, you know, it's such a cliché, my younger sister and my best mate. But after this, somehow I don't think I have it in me anymore."

"Oh, that'd be a shame," grinned Ginny. "It's always so fun to attack Harry and get a reaction out of you. It's like, two good things at once."

"Well, I suppose I could try," conceded Ron.

"That's the spirit," said Ginny. She leaned over to Harry, took his face in her hands, and started kissing him. Ron said nothing for a few seconds, then with obvious false enthusiasm, said, "All right, Ginny! Go for it!"

Ginny and Harry fell out of the kiss as they started laughing, as did the other three. "Oh, my, that just doesn't sound right," chuckled Hermione.

"I appreciate the effort, Ron," smiled Ginny. Leaning against Harry's chest and putting her arms around him, she exhaled in satisfaction. "Well, at least that part of it's over. No more having to think about it, that any particular thing could be viewed."

Harry agreed to himself that it would be a relief, but he didn't want to think about the circumstances under which it had happened. "It never occurred to me that there would be a good point about Snape getting blown. I just thought of something... I wonder what would have happened if he'd got blown, but there wasn't this possibility that I could change him back?"

"That would have been bad," agreed Hermione. "The problem is, you're the one who helped him, and he needed to be on his best behavior around you, but he blamed you for his getting exposed, and was really mad at you. It would've been very hard for him to calm down enough about that for you to help him."

Harry nodded, indicating that that had been what he'd been thinking. "I just hope I can do this thing, now."

"The important thing to remember," said Hermione earnestly, "is that it's not your fault if something goes wrong. He's been living on borrowed time for a long time now, and it probably wasn't going to be that long before Voldemort was defeated anyway, and he'd be in the same position. This only changes the timing a bit. I don't want you thinking, if this doesn't go well... you've done a lot for him, you've done all you could."

"I suppose so," he said, though he found it hard to accept the idea that he shouldn't blame himself if something went wrong. Still holding onto Ginny, he found himself thinking

about what Snape had said about Grindelwald. Is it really the same thing? he asked himself. The fact is, if I'd thought about using the wand to Disapparate, Voldemort would be in custody now, or dead, and this would all be over. How many more people are going to die because I didn't think of the right thing to do at the right time? I should have thought about-

"Harry!" snapped Hermione, in an accusatory tone. Harry blinked, wondering what he'd done. "Don't you dare think that! Snape was just trying to hurt you because he was mad at you. Albus had Grindelwald in his power; I don't think it's fair to say that you ever did with Voldemort. You can always look back at a situation and think you could have done something differently. Would you have wanted me to blame myself for what I did to Skeeter, that almost messed up your life pretty badly?"

Harry finally understood. "Fawkes," he said, annoyed, though it was hard for him to ever be truly annoyed at Fawkes.

To the others, Hermione explained, "Harry was thinking that Snape was right, that it was his fault Voldemort got away. Fawkes sent it to me. I think he's afraid that Harry's going to start counting the bodies from now on, blaming himself for them, and hopes I, or we, can stop him. Harry, you just can't think like that, you can't. It wasn't Albus's fault that Grindelwald got away; things just happen. And I think this one happened for a reason. Honestly, I think you were right, that this is the only way to really kill Voldemort, so he's truly dead. And if you had done what you wish you had done, you wouldn't have had a chance to find this out. Things happen, Harry. It's pointless to blame yourself, you did the best you could."

"You blamed yourself, this summer," he reluctantly pointed out.

"Exactly, so I know what I'm talking about," she retorted. A part of Harry understood that she was right; he knew most people wouldn't have done as much as he had. He chuckled to himself. "What?" asked Hermione.

"I just thought, I'd better not spend too much time blaming myself, or Fawkes is going to keep telling you, and you'll be bothering me all the time," said Harry.

"Yes, that's probably why he told me," she agreed humorously. "He doesn't want you blaming yourself, because he feels it, too. Not that he'd mind if it was justified, but this isn't. Even though he doesn't see the situation like we do, I'm pretty sure that on some level, he knows that."

"Maybe," he said.

"And that would be," she pressed him, "because on some level, you know that."

Harry thought, but didn't answer; his only reaction was to hold Ginny more tightly. He wondered if he could accept what Hermione was saying. He thought she was right, that on some level, he knew that he shouldn't blame himself; he had been in an extremely stressful situation, and he'd done his best. He had eventually learned not to blame himself for Hogsmeade; he knew this was different, but it was similar in a way. He wondered how many historical figures suffered from regrets or second thoughts. Probably a lot, he told himself.

Harry glanced up in surprise as the Pensieve floated into the room; a quick glance around told him that Hermione had Summoned it from his office. He let go of Ginny as she sat up

straight. "You know how I've always put a memory in this when we've practiced Legilimens, since summer," said Hermione. She put a memory into the Pensieve, then gestured to it. "We think you should see it. Go ahead."

Startled, Harry gaped in amazement. "But isn't that a memory of..."

Hermione looked greatly amused at what she knew he was thinking. Deadpan, Neville said, "Yes, Harry, that's right. We wanted to show you a memory of us having sex. We thought you should see how it was done properly."

Ron, Pansy, and Ginny burst out laughing, then after a second, so did Hermione. Neville didn't smile until Harry gave him a 'very funny' look. "Well," said Ginny, still laughing, "If I'm any judge—"

"Please," said Ron, interrupting his own laughter, "whatever you do, please don't finish that sentence."

"I thought you were going to change how you were about that," protested Ginny with feigned disappointment.

"You're right, I forgot," said Ron. Again sounding very insincere, he said, "What I meant to say is, please tell us in great detail about Harry's capabilities in that area. We all really want to know."

"Well, if you insist," said Ginny agreeably. "First of all—"

Harry playfully reached over and covered Ginny's mouth with his hand. To Neville and Hermione, he protested, "Come on, you can hardly blame me for thinking that."

"If it were that, well, let's just say I'd have had to put more than that into the Pensieve every time," said a still-amused

Hermione. "No, it's a bit more serious than that. What you're about to see is from near the end of the Apparation crisis, during the shift when you caught Malfoy. When Neville and I had our big talk after getting the Skeeter letters."

Harry's eyebrows went up; whatever it was, he knew, it was bound to be very personal. He thought to ask, why this but not any other memory, but he realized that question would probably be answered as he viewed it. As he took his hand off Ginny's mouth and put it in the Pensieve, he heard her say, "Now, as I was about to say..."

He was suddenly in Neville's Auror quarters. Neville and Hermione both looked very emotional; he would have known they were having an important conversation even if he hadn't already been told. Hermione looked as though she had cried recently.

Neville spoke first. "It's not that I don't believe you. It's just that... you say you can't tell me why you did it, because of what I'm not supposed to know. I just don't know how I can accept that... I mean, the whole problem is that you violated my trust. How can I just say, well, I trust you that it was for a good reason? If I'm going to accept that, I really need to know why."

Hermione looked like she might cry again. "I don't know what to tell you, Neville. You know I'm not supposed to tell anyone this, you know it's for a good reason. What can I say, more than that?"

"You need to trust me," he replied earnestly. "Tell me what it is. Whatever it is, nobody else will know that I know. But I have to know."

"It sounds like you're saying you can't trust me unless I tell you this," she said. He glanced down, then looked her in the

eye, saying nothing. She sighed. "I guess I can't blame you, and it's not as though I should be telling you what you should and shouldn't think." She paused for a short time, thinking. Finally, she said, "It's ironic, I have to violate Harry's trust to get yours back."

"That's not fair," protested Neville. "I never asked you to—"

"I know, I know," she said sadly. "This is all my fault, I'm not saying it's not."

"Harry will understand," said Neville. "Just explain it to him."

"I wish I could explain it to him, it would make me feel better," she said ruefully. "If I could explain it to him, I could ask his permission, and he'd give it. Of course, it's not totally his to give, but never mind that for now. Okay, here it is..."

The scene shifted; Neville and Hermione had barely moved, but clearly Hermione had edited the memory so that Harry would be spared the explanation she gave Neville. After it resumed, Neville looked stunned, which didn't surprise Harry at all. "That's got to be the weirdest thing I've ever heard," said Neville. "Now I understand perfectly, of course. It was a sweet gesture, and I would have approved of it, if I'd known the situation."

"I knew you would," she said. "That was part of what helped me decide to do it, even though I couldn't tell you, or would have to give you not enough information if I did tell you. It just never occurred to me how it would look to you if you ever found out..."

"Because you didn't think I would find out," he finished. "She's just so nasty, she knew just how to make it look the worst."

She nodded. "As with the other things, though, I didn't help. I should have told you everything I could have, you would have trusted me then. If I lost your trust, I deserved to." There was a short silence; Harry wondered whether Neville was just thinking, or was being conspicuously silent. Hermione spoke again, saying, "Now, of course, I'll have to put a memory, this one, into the Pensieve every time before Harry and I practice Legilimency. Fortunately, he'll just think it's something sexual, and so will Snape if he sees that I'm hiding a memory. The important thing for both of us to remember is that we can't talk about it or refer to it from here on out, even when we're alone. There's only a tiny chance that Harry would see anything, but he can't hide anything from Snape, and if Snape saw it... well, it would be bad. He'd blame Harry, it might even jeopardize their situation. We have to be careful."

Neville nodded. "I understand. Poor Harry, I feel so bad for him. I mean, with Snape? How in the world is he managing that?"

"It hasn't been that long, but he's doing all right, apparently," she said, after which the memory reset to the beginning.

Harry exited the Pensieve to see Hermione looking at him apprehensively. She opened her mouth to speak, but Ron beat her to it. "Wow, that was some amazing stuff you told us, Ginny."

Harry rolled his eyes. "If she really had, you'd be long gone," he said.

"You've got to get up pretty early to fool Harry," joked Pansy.

"Not really... usually, you can sleep in till noon," responded Ron.

Hermione waited to make sure they were finished. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"I understand," he said somberly. "You did it right, I'll say that. I never had any idea, which was the point. And at least Neville knew not to tell me anything he didn't want Snape knowing."

"There were times when I wished I could have told Ron and Pansy the same thing," agreed Hermione. "Especially when that thing with Blaise happened. She wouldn't have come to you if she'd known. Oh, that reminds me, I can lift the Memory Charm now!"

"Oh, good, I've been wondering what's behind that," he said. "Now okay?"

She nodded, and cast Legilimens on him. She pointed him to the Charm, and he unlocked it quickly; the memories came flooding back. Seeing his look of recognition, Pansy said, "It was a shame that you couldn't remember that. Helen and Sylvia's 100's came two days after that, and we-the second years and I-are sure that meeting had a lot to do with it, with their scores in general. You deserved to enjoy that, but you couldn't."

"Well, I can now," he said, feeling very satisfied. "Of course--"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door; Hermione waved it open to reveal Hugo. "Hugo, I should've known," said Harry, gesturing him to a spot on the floor. "I'm always so preoccupied after these things happen that I forget you're bound to show up."

"Understandable," said Hugo as he sat between Harry and Hermione. "How's the hand?"

"I forget I shouldn't touch things, and the static reminds me," he said. "Pretty good, though. A lot better than before, for sure."

"I saw Kingsley's memory of your hand, it looked really nasty," agreed Hugo. "Snape had a lot of nerve, acting like that should be no impediment to your picking up a wand. It'd damn well be an impediment to most people, including me."

"Is that your way of asking if he feels bad about not picking it up?" asked Hermione, her expression neutral. Harry thought there was a slight edge to her tone, but had no idea why.

Sensing Harry's puzzlement, Hugo explained. "I've aroused Hermione's protective instincts. She knows my question will cause you to think about that, which obviously she doesn't want you doing. The fact is, Hermione, that it wasn't deliberate, but it might have been... unconsciously deliberate. I do have this journalistic habit of asking questions or making comments in a way that doesn't directly address a sensitive subject, but will likely remind the person of it; I can then get a read on how they feel about it, and whether they'd be receptive to talking about it. I wasn't trying to do that here—Harry tends to answer anything I ask—but it may be from that habit. So I'm sorry, to both of you, since I sense Harry's less bothered than you are."

"You know, Hermione, that I am going to have to think about this," pointed out Harry. "It would be impossible for me not to, and you can't go bothering me every time the phoenixes tell you I'm thinking about it. If I'm obsessing, then okay, bother me. But I've barely had a chance to think about it yet."

"I can just see you doing it," she replied unhappily. "But yes, I suppose you do at least have to think about it. So, Hugo, I gather you've seen Kingsley's memory of the meeting we had."

"Yes, so now I finally understand what the thing with Snape is. I knew it was something unusual; not only wouldn't he talk to me, he wouldn't allow me in his presence, ever. I see why, now. Obviously, I'm deeply impressed at what you did for him, what Dumbledore did. And I understand you're worried about tomorrow, but Harry, I could see enough in the memory to know that he really couldn't wait longer."

"I know," said Harry heavily. "This was his worst fear, that he would stop being useful. Well, I guess I'll just do my best, and hope it ends up all right. Anyway, Hugo, what's going to be made public?"

"A lot of it will, I'll just tell you what won't be. Nothing about him pulling information from you, or anything to do with how you plan to beat him. Nothing about the details of how you got away, such as that ring; he's probably still wondering about that. If he's not still screaming, that is. Nothing suggesting that there was anything you could have done but didn't do. If you're going to wrestle with demons, at least you get to do it privately," said Hugo sympathetically. "Pretty much everything else will be public."

"Even the hand?" asked Ron, amazed.

"It was decided that it was too good to pass up, from a morale point of view," explained Hugo. "You accomplished something big, Harry, but the biggest thing is something they can't make public. The hand will be very compelling, both narratively and photographically--"

"They're going to run a picture of it? Isn't that going to be a little..." wondered Harry.

"It'll be one of those things where you have to hold your wand over it to see it," Hugo assured him, "and there'll be a big warning of what it is. Don't worry, the bracelet will be in the picture also, and the caption will explain that you did it to get the bracelet. Of course, most people will just be happy that you took a chunk out of him, they won't care why. Harry, emotions are running high right now, and it's going to be that much more when people find out about the deaths of five Aurors. I'm starting to hear rumblings, both within the Ministry, and outside of it, about it not being a bad idea to just kill any Death Eaters we capture. After a trial, of course. Partly because they might escape and kill again, and partly... as revenge."

Harry chuckled humorlessly. "I'm sure Snape would approve."

"No doubt," agreed Hugo. "He killed Skeeter, didn't he?" he asked, his tone making it more a statement than a question. Harry's expression clearly having told him he was correct, Hugo continued, "I suspected it back then, to tell you the truth. Well, would you mind if I looked at your memory of it, from when you were taken until you escaped?"

Harry shrugged. "You can, but it's going to be pretty boring; most of it is just me doing Legilimens, which is why I didn't show it to the others."

"That's okay, I can skip forward if I want." Harry put the memory in, and Hugo entered the Pensieve.

Looking slightly embarrassed, Ron said, "I kind of want to see it too, but it would be for... definitely the wrong reasons."

I wouldn't mind seeing you taking his hand off, or that scream you said he did at the end."

"I want to also," said Neville, "and it would be for the wrong reasons, but I don't care. I know, Harry, I know all about... that word I can't pronounce--"

"Schadenfreude," supplied Hermione.

"Yes, that one. I know I shouldn't go out of my way to enjoy it, but I do want to see it, just once. Maybe it's like the Malfoy thing. He's caused a lot of suffering, and there's something good about seeing what happened, and it's not necessarily... that word."

"I think I know what Neville means," said Hermione. "It's kind of what Hugo was just mentioning, about why they're putting the picture of the hand in the paper. It's good for morale, you were able to inflict a pretty bad injury on him. Nobody's ever been able to do that, except you, first as a baby and then now. Hearing about it is one thing, seeing it is another."

Harry found that he could understand that, though he had no desire to see it again, much less see it and enjoy it.

"Okay, after Hugo gets out, I'll make an edited version, and you can see that. It won't take long." To his surprise, Hugo exited the Pensieve a minute later, after which he edited the memory and put it back in. All five of his friends and Hugo watched it.

Ginny moved over to Harry and hugged him again. "I think Hugo was right, Snape does have his nerve to expect that of you, to pick up a burning-hot wand as if it were nothing. I hate to see you in that kind of pain, especially the second time."

"As you know, he's dealt with much, much worse than that," he reminded her. She reluctantly nodded, but wore an expression of, 'but, still...'

"I had a question, Harry," said Hugo. "Well, I could ask as part of the interview, but I thought of it now, so... after you woke up, you grabbed his wand, took off his hand, then did the Imperius Charm. The wand burns when you use the person's wand against him, but you didn't seem to be in pain until you did the Imperius Charm. Do you have any idea why?"

Surprised, Harry shook his head. "It seems like I should have been right away, doesn't it."

Hugo nodded. "I was surprised that you didn't activate the wand's defense by taking off his hand, then drop it reflexively before you could do the Charm."

"Me, too, now that you mention it. I think I sort of did it in one motion, so maybe the curse on the wand took just long enough to activate that I was able to get the Charm in before I felt it."

Hugo raised his eyebrows. "That would be strange, most spells don't have that kind of delay, even for a half a second. Anyway, would you mind doing the interview now, or were you guys in the middle of something?"

"I think they were just making fun of me, so no, nothing special," joked Harry. "Now's okay."

Harry rolled over in bed after finishing his Occlumency exercises. Do I really even need to do these any more? he asked himself. I don't think he's going to be coming after me the way he did before. Better safe than sorry, I guess. Harry wondered whether he could actually go after Voldemort from

a distance as Voldemort had him. It was an interesting question, but he knew he would never try.

He started playing the day's events over in his mind, starting with Blaise giving him the warning in his class. Was Snape right, he wondered, should he not have gone? It hadn't occurred to him during the day to ask Ginny what she thought, though he knew she would probably have said that he would do what he would do anyway, so her opinion didn't really matter. He knew her emotional reaction would be that he should never go into danger deliberately.

Five Aurors dead, he thought despondently. Looks like Kingsley was wrong about that jailbreak not being such a bad thing. Maybe they're not Death Eaters, but they know the Killing Curse, and that's all Voldemort needed. There aren't enough free, Cleansed Death Eaters to overwhelm six Aurors like that. No, I made the right decision by going. I couldn't save them, but if things had gone differently, I might have been able to. Yes, Albus warned me it was a trap, but I just should have reacted better, should have remembered that Death Eaters could have taken hair from Neville and Hermione when they had them in July. I had to go. Maybe Voldemort knew that, but I still had to go. Snape only yelled at me because it got him blown, but he knows me, he knew I had to do it.

Not having Apparated Voldemort out of the plane when he had the chance was another matter, however. No matter how much Bright, Ginny, Hugo, or anyone else said that it was understandable that he didn't think to use the wand, he knew better. He knew that if he'd thought of it, he would've done it. He took small comfort in the thought that his mistake would cost fewer lives than Dumbledore's had, since Voldemort tended to kill fewer people personally. He wasn't sure whether he should hold himself personally responsible

for anyone Death Eaters killed from that point on, since they could continue killing anyway, even if Voldemort was killed. They just liked to kill, Harry knew. Then he remembered Dumbledore once reminding him that he was responsible only for his own actions, not those of others. At the same time, Dumbledore hadn't applied that to himself. He knew it, but he couldn't internalize it. Harry wondered whether he would do any better, or whether it was better not to do it at all. Perhaps it was immoral not to hold himself responsible in that kind of situation.

Variations on those thoughts rolled around in his head for the next half hour. He didn't reach any conclusions, of course; he doubted he ever would. He imagined Voldemort's next victim, a death he could have stopped if he'd thought correctly. He felt as though there were a lead weight in his stomach, that he had condemned some unknown person to death. He wanted to run, to do anything he could to escape the feeling. Why didn't I think of it, he asked himself for the tenth time. What's wrong with me, why don't I think as well as other people. Hermione would have thought of it, probably a lot of other people would have, too. But not me, I don't see what's in front of my face.

Suddenly an image popped into his head, along with a feeling. The image was of Hermione standing at the podium in the Great Hall last November; Harry recalled that she was saying that he was someone for whom others could risk their lives for without hesitation. The feeling was one of compassion and acceptance. He knew that Hermione must have known what he'd been thinking, and sent him what he'd just felt. She was communicating in a way very different from words, but he knew what she was trying to say: We all have our strengths, and leadership is yours. You've done more than almost anyone could have done, you've accomplished so much. You're not alone.

Without stopping to think, he sent a response: an image of himself in bed in the dark, eyes wide open. The feeling he sent was part of what he'd been feeling in the past half hour: fear of having allowed harm to come to others, and loneliness, even though he knew he was loved. I feel alone, he communicated. I don't want to feel like this, but I can't help it. All this responsibility, just on me.

You're not alone, we're all with you, she sent back with her feelings. Even if we're asleep, we're always with you. Think of us, imagine what we're thinking, and you'll realize it's true. You'll understand you're not alone.

I'm scared, he sent, the thought that he was communicating things he would never say verbally flashing through his mind for a second. Scared of what might happen tomorrow with Snape, scared of who might die next, more scared than you knew I was. People wouldn't have confidence in me if they knew how scared I was.

This is a hard night, today was a hard day, she said without words. We all get scared, it's all right. I'm here with you, the others would be if they could. Think about Ginny, think about us, focus on love. I'll be with you until you fall asleep, then Albus will be. You're never alone. I/we love you.

A duet of phoenix song suddenly began; he glanced up in the darkness to see Fawkes and Flora at the end of his bed. He sent out a feeling of deep gratitude, to Hermione and to the phoenixes. He focused on the song, and on the feelings of love Hermione continued sending him. Sooner than he would have thought possible, he was asleep.

* * * * *

The next thing he knew, he was standing next to a stream. "Hermione is right, you know," said Dumbledore,

approaching him. "You are never truly alone, you are always loved."

"I guess sometimes I just need to be reminded of that," said Harry as he accepted Dumbledore's hug. They sat next to the stream.

"As do we all," agreed Dumbledore. "I am simply fortunate that here, I can be reminded so easily."

Harry thought for a minute about what he wanted to say, even though he knew Dumbledore was seeing his thoughts. "There's no way I can make myself feel better about this, is there?"

Dumbledore gave a small nod. "You can listen to the people who care about you. What they tell you is the truth. No, they cannot truly know how you feel, since they are not you. But they can know well enough to understand much of what you are going through; you should not dismiss them simply because they cannot know exactly."

"But you suffered so much, after Grindelwald got away."

"That does not mean you have to," Dumbledore pointed out reasonably. "Much of what I suffered was unnecessary. I was living in a foreign country; I was rather isolated. Of course I could Apparate back to England at any time, and occasionally I did. But I did not talk to people as much as I should have, nor did I open up to those I did talk to as much as I should have. I felt I had to suffer alone; of course, I realized much later that I was very wrong. You are surrounded by people who love you and want to help you, both physically and emotionally. Any isolation you feel is simply that of your own choosing."

Harry thought for a minute, then said, "But I do have to suffer for what I didn't do, I can't avoid that."

Dumbledore gently shook his head. "No, you do not have to suffer, difficult as that may be to accept. You could choose to learn from what has happened, accept that you cannot change it, and focus on the here and now. I am not saying that it is easy, just that it is possible. Just because I could not manage it does not mean that you could not."

"How can I not suffer from this?" asked Harry plaintively.

"Unhelpful as the answer may sound, simply by choosing not to," replied Dumbledore. "Very much of what we experience is by choice, even things that we seem to have little control over. Everything that happens in your mind happens by your choice. We are simply not accustomed to exercising conscious control over those choices."

"Did you?" asked Harry, curious.

"To an extent, a greater extent than I believe most people manage," admitted Dumbledore. "For example, I was never able to completely absolve myself of blame for such things as what happened to you yesterday, but I was eventually able to 'let it go' much more quickly than I otherwise would have, to not dwell on it. There is no reason you cannot do the same."

"Can you give me any advice on how to do it?"

"The most important advice I can give is that you believe that it is possible," said Dumbledore. "I have told you how important thoughts are. You would be amazed at what you can do if you simply believe that you can."

"I want to believe it," said Harry, who felt that he was a certain distance away from actually doing so. "So, will believing I can do it help me with what I'm going to try with Professor Snape tomorrow?"

"Of course, it is most helpful to avoid using words like 'try,'" advised Dumbledore, as the other Snape appeared. "But, yes, it will indeed help."

Harry stood and embraced Snape. "We may not do this again," said Snape humorously. "Even as a whole entity, I was never in the habit of hugging."

"Maybe if I succeed, he, or you, will feel differently," suggested Harry.

"It is not impossible," agreed Snape. "We have no way to know how I will respond when I am successfully reunited with my other half."

"Note that he uses the phrase 'when,' not 'if,' said Dumbledore with a smile.

"I did notice that," replied Harry, smiling as well. "Is that confidence, or just wanting to think positively?"

"Both," replied Snape. "I cannot think of anyone I would rather have doing this than you. Not because you are an expert in the procedure—who could be?—but because you will act out of love. No one could ask for more than that."

I hope that's enough, thought Harry. "How is he doing?"

"He is struggling, though he is doing better than he was when you saw him last. He has had some time to recover from the shock of losing the ability to be a spy, but his emotional state is still precarious. Right now, the only thing

that keeps him going is the knowledge that it will soon be over for him. I would recommend that you begin as soon as you feel comfortable. He has not slept tonight, nor will he. Minerva is staying up with him, keeping him company."

"That's very good of her," said Harry, impressed. "I have a feeling he's not making it easy for her."

"Indeed not," agreed Snape. "He insists that he does not need her company, but they both know that is not true. She has assured him that she will speak to you after breakfast to find out when you will be ready."

Harry sighed. "I don't think I'm really going to be ready, but I know what you mean. I'll do my best. Is there anything you can tell me that will help?"

Snape shook his head. "You know more about the procedure for the Cleansing by having viewed it than I do, having undergone it. The pain was so intense, I could not even begin to think about how it was being done, just about enduring it. Just so you are prepared, what you will do will probably cause intense... discomfort. He said that it was not exactly pain when you did the Imperius Charm on him; this will probably be quite similar. You should try not to be overly disturbed by this; it is inevitable.

"I should say something about the aftermath, however. You should not have any particular expectations of his behavior afterwards; if he, or we, act much like he used to, it will not mean that you failed, or that something went wrong. His manner after the Cleansing was not so different from his manner before it. Before, he had the potential for pleasant emotions; it was simply very rarely that he experienced them. There is just no way to predict how he, we, will behave once this is done."

"I understand," said Harry. "I guess I didn't expect him to suddenly run around grinning all the time anyway. No one's ever had done to them what he's about to, so I guess we'll all find out. Oh, one thing I wondered about: will he, or the both of you, will you remember, I mean, will you keep your memories of being here?"

"I cannot be sure, but I think it highly likely that I will not," said Snape. "I will remember what I have seen in your memories, of course."

Harry nodded. "I guess there's not that much more to say, then. But I do want to say that I'll miss you being here. I've appreciated all your help."

Snape smiled. "It's definitely the other way around. You have done so much, sacrificed so much, to help us... I don't know whether we, reunited, will be able to convey our appreciation for all you have done, so I will now. I see that you are thinking that you did it for the Order, which is true, but you did it for me as well. Thank you very much."

Harry glanced down, slightly embarrassed. "You're welcome." Turning to Dumbledore, he asked, "I can't help but wonder, Albus... is Voldemort still screaming?"

"I am pleased that you take no pleasure from the prospect," said Dumbledore. "No, but shortly after he returned to them, he was sedated by his Death Eaters. He is now conscious and under heavy sedation; he is not screaming, but is in very serious discomfort."

"I assume he knows what I did," said Harry. "After all, it was his thought that gave me the idea."

Dumbledore nodded. "He is barely capable of coherent thought or speech, but yes, he knows. He is still in denial

about the nature of what you do, however. He thinks that you have stumbled onto a source of power, which you mistakenly identify as love, but which he is particularly vulnerable to. He perceives what you have done as... roughly, burning a hole in his psyche, or consciousness, whichever you like. We would perceive it as a spot of light, or a spot from which love has the potential to grow. To him love does not exist, so he sees it as a hole. It burns him, as it were; it causes him intense pain because it cannot be reconciled with the rest of him, but it also cannot be gotten rid of easily. Severus was likely correct when he suggested that Voldemort would find a way to deal with it in time, but it is a very positive sign. It strongly suggests that what you intend to do to him will be effective."

"Do you think that Hermione and I might be right, that this may be the only way to truly kill him?"

"It may be," agreed Dumbledore. "Of course, I do not know that any more than you do. I sense that you hope that is the case; if it is, you feel you need not blame yourself for what happened today. I say again, of course, that you need not blame yourself in any case."

"I hope that I can not blame myself, at some point," said Harry ruefully. "That would be nice, and I do see your point, it's just that... well, I don't need to explain, you know how it is for me."

"Only too well," said Dumbledore gravely. "You will stop blaming yourself at some point, as I did. It is simply a question of when." He paused, then added, "We should stop for tonight. You fell asleep later than usual, and you will want to be at full alertness tomorrow." Harry nodded, and was asleep again.

* * * * *

Harry awoke to find that he was the only one in his dormitory. A look at his clock told him that it was seven-thirty, a little later than he usually got up. Winter vacation had technically begun, so he had no official commitments, and he was glad to get the extra sleep.

He changed into his day clothes and left the dormitory. Heading to the portrait hole, he was intercepted by Andrea Creevey. "Professor!"

He looked over to see that she had run over from where she had been sitting with the other second year girls, huddled around a copy of the Prophet. "Hi, Andrea. You have the paper already?"

"You got up kind of late," she noted. He took a few steps over to look at the paper over the girls' shoulders as they looked up and greeted him. "I can't believe you..." Andrea held her wrist with her hand.

"Good on you, I say," said Seamus, sitting nearby with Dean. "But why not his neck while you were at it?"

Bet that's not the first time I get asked that, he thought. "The energy of love doesn't like violence," he said. "I have to be concerned that if I try to kill him and fail, I could lose the ability to use it. You remember my talk last week about Dumbledore and Grindelwald."

"But you took off his hand," Seamus pointed out. "That's kind of violent. Could you have done, say, a whole arm, or a leg?"

A few of the girls made 'ewww' noises. "It has to be for a good reason, it can't just be violence for the sake of it,"

explained Harry. "It's hard to explain, but let's just say that if I was in a frame of mind where I could take off his arms and legs for no good reason except that he's Voldemort, it would be a frame of mind where I couldn't use the energy of love." Echoing Kingsley's comment from yesterday, he added, "It gives you a lot of power, but there's kind of a price—a feeling that violence is just unacceptable. I know that may be hard for people to understand, but I don't mind it. I'm not going to beat Voldemort with violence. I just had to get that bracelet off him."

"And the wand was burning hot," pointed out one of the girls. "He couldn't have used it like that anyway. Didn't you see the picture?"

"Yeah, that did look nasty," acknowledged Seamus, as Harry gave the girl an inquiring look. She turned to another page of the Prophet, and he saw a few pictures which Hugo had obviously gotten as images from Kingsley's memory. One was of him and Bright, Bright's hand extended, Harry holding up his to show why he couldn't shake Bright's hand. There was a small image of a magnifying glass hovering over his hand, indicating that holding the wand over the spot would magnify that part of the picture. Another picture was a close-up of his head and shoulders, dirty and bloodied, from soon after he had returned. Below the picture was a quote: 'I Didn't Escape Him, He Escaped Me.' Harry remembered having said it, but somehow it seemed different as a picture caption, more like boasting than he'd intended for it to sound.

"So, what's the plan for vacation?" asked Seamus with a grin. "Go finish him off?"

"I would, if I knew where to find him," he replied grimly.

Seamus raised his eyebrows, evidently not having expected that answer. "You really aren't afraid of him, are you?"

"No," Harry replied quietly. More to himself than to the others, he added, "No, right now, he's afraid of me." He left, and headed out to get breakfast.

As he exited the portrait hole, he got an impression from Hermione, via Fawkes. Don't say anything to anyone about last night, she sent. He got an image of Ginny, and an emotional impression of being upset.

He wanted to send back the question, do you mean she is upset, or that she might be upset, but he wasn't sure what to send to clarify it. He realized that communicating with a human through a phoenix was quite different from communicating with a phoenix. He would have no need to convey the abstract idea of future or past to Fawkes; he wondered if he and Hermione should invent some visual shorthand for concepts that phoenixes wouldn't use. Having an idea but wanting to understand her thinking, he sent back, why?

She'd like to do what I did, but she can't, not the same way, sent Hermione. Remember, she's sensitive about this. We should talk about this privately before you say anything to her.

We didn't do anything wrong, he sent. I'm so grateful for what you did, it really helped.

I know, and I'm glad, she replied as he neared the Great Hall. No, it's not wrong, but it's better to be careful. We don't want Ginny's feelings to get hurt if we can avoid it. Trust me, and talk to me privately as soon as you can.

Uneasy, he entered the Hall. He had some idea of why there could be a problem, but wasn't sure why it should be such a big thing. Heading to his usual spot, he sat; all his friends were already there, and most had apparently already finished their food. "I think that's about as late as you can get up and still get food," remarked Ron. "Of course, you're a teacher, so you could always get house-elves to deliver to your quarters. Did you need extra sleep from talking to Dumbledore too long?"

He shook his head. "Just had some trouble sleeping." He felt oddly guilty, even though he would have given the same answer if Hermione hadn't talked to him the night before.

Ginny gave him a sad look, and reached her hand across the table. "You know you can always talk to me, even if you think I might be asleep. My hand might not wake me up, but the pendant probably would." He took her hand and nodded, but said nothing.

"Well, Harry, there's already fallout from yesterday," said Hermione, handing him her copy of the Prophet. As he opened it, another copy fell on top of it. "Nice timing," he said, in the direction of the owl that dropped it.

"Well, he's probably been waiting for a half hour for you to show, so he could drop it and be on his way," pointed out Neville reasonably.

Harry shrugged. "Sorry," he called out facetiously to the departing owl, then opened the paper, handing Hermione back hers. There were two main front-page articles: one about Harry's abduction, and one about the Aurors being killed. Looking at the bottom of the page, he found the one Hermione was referring to, titled, 'Calls Grow In Ministry For Summary Execution Of Death Eaters In Custody.' Harry

looked up at Hermione and raised his eyebrows; she gave him a small shrug and gestured for him to read.

In the wake of yesterday's Death Eater attacks on the Aurors and Harry Potter (see articles above) in which five Aurors died, wizards and witches both in and out of the Ministry started speaking out in favor of a temporary re-instituting of capital punishment, to be meted out to those involved in Death Eater attacks.

The Ministry itself has taken no position on the matter as yet, but sources inside the Ministry say that they are looking at the idea favorably. An Undersecretary who requested anonymity was quoted as saying, "I don't like it especially; it isn't what any of us would really prefer. But enough is enough. We have to protect people, to protect our citizens. How many have died at the hands of escaped Death Eaters? If they're dead, they won't kill any more. This is the only thing these people understand."

There are, of course, plenty who believe that even a temporary return to capital punishment is going too far. "Yes, it's a dire situation," agreed a high Ministry official. "But the state killing people is not the answer; we must simply do a better job of holding on to those we have. We value life, and for us to kill in cold blood sends the wrong message to our children: that any action can be justified in the right circumstances. Some things are simply wrong."

All agree that emotions are running high in the wizarding world in recent days. Over the past week and a half, twenty-five wizards have died, and many more would have but for Professor Potter and those who have learned to use his Killing Curse shield. Over the past year and two months, since last year's attack on the village of Hogsmeade, thirty-two Death Eaters in Ministry custody have escaped. A jail to

replace Azkaban is in the early stages of construction, in high secrecy, but it will not be completed for some time—time enough, many fear, for those in custody now to be freed yet again, to kill yet again.

Conversations last night with residents of Hogsmeade and those shopping in Diagon Alley suggest that significant support exists for such measures. Three years ago, public opinion was firmly against capital punishment. But as the quote above from the Ministry Undersecretary suggests, many who do not approve of capital punishment in principle may be willing to support it in this particular situation. Furthermore, twenty-two were captured in yesterday's attack on the Aurors, putting further strain on the Ministry's ability to guard dangerous prisoners.

Minister of Magic Rudolphus Bright has not yet spoken publicly on this matter, and was unavailable for comment yesterday after spending the afternoon meeting with the Aurors and Professor Potter, then with Ministry officials well into the evening.

"Wow, this has gotten really bad," said Harry upon finishing the article. "I didn't realize people were this ready to do this."

"You can see the appeal, though," pointed out Hermione. "It would solve one problem on a practical level—you don't have to keep prisoners if you've killed them all—and nobody can say they don't deserve it. It's also more palatable if we say it's 'temporary.' I mean, it probably would be, but they're still talking about killing people. From a moral point of view, obviously, it doesn't really matter whether it's 'temporary' or not, but it sounds better."

Harry grunted in agreement. "Yes, it's temporary until there's no one left to kill. After that, they'll stop."

"I think they mean, temporary until Voldemort is defeated," suggested Ron. "Until then, any Death Eater that gets captured, that's it. You know, Harry," he said, looking at Harry solemnly, "I can't say I think this is a totally bad idea. Like that Undersecretary bloke said, I don't like it. But however many they have right now could get out at any time, and they'd kill again, we know that for sure."

"Obviously, we've already discussed this a bit," said Hermione. "I understand what Ron says, but I just can't get myself to agree to have a part in killing people, no matter how much they deserve it. It's a moral issue, and it shouldn't have anything to do with the practical aspects of our situation."

"I don't think you can separate them," responded Ron. "It seems more morally wrong to me, to let innocent people die to protect the lives of Death Eaters—"

"It's to protect a principle, Ron, not the Death Eaters' lives," snapped Hermione. "If you say it that way, you make it sound like anyone who opposes this is pro-Death Eater. That's how politicians talk when they want to make their opponents look bad. I've read enough political stuff by now, I know how it works."

"Well, I didn't mean that, obviously," conceded Ron. "You know what I meant."

"I assume, Harry, you're still not in favor of this, right?" asked Hermione.

He grimaced slightly. "I do see the point, and... I hadn't thought about capital punishment much before this year,

but whenever I do now, I think of Sirius. If they'd had capital punishment then, I would never have met him."

"Well, obviously, we'd have to be really careful," said Ron.

"You mean, only kill the guilty ones?" responded Hermione sardonically. "It doesn't work that way. People make mistakes; if you have capital punishment, innocent people will eventually die. Azkaban was a living hell, but at least a person could be taken out if it turned out they were innocent."

"But I'm talking about where it's temporary," pointed out Ron. "I think we can be pretty sure that anyone the Aurors catch like this is guilty, and this would only be until the end of this situation."

"That's true," she conceded. "And I'm not happy at the thought of Death Eaters escaping and killing any of you, or anyone for that matter. I'm just saying, it's a really hard issue. I don't envy you, Harry." He gave her a puzzled look, not understanding what she meant. "You're going to be asked what you think, publicly," she said sympathetically.

"Then I'll say what I think," he replied, still not understanding why she felt it would be such a problem. "Do you think I shouldn't?"

"No, I'm not saying that. It just... could be complicated. What I would say is, you should definitely talk to Archibald before you say anything. You have to be careful, your words have impact."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Neville. "Just ask any of the dozens of people here who've been called 'unbelievable morons' in the past week."

"I didn't quite mean that kind of impact," said Hermione, though knowing that Neville was joking.

"I guess I should find him, see if he's going anywhere," said Harry. "I should talk to Kingsley, too, see what the Aurors think."

"Considering what happened yesterday, I'm not sure their opinion will be the same as it usually would," suggested Neville.

"Strictly from the point of view of the Aurors' best interests, they'd be for it," said Hermione. "Between that and their emotional response, it would be a pretty strong statement of principle for them to oppose it, and my impression is that most organizations take positions that reflect their interests. But, who knows; they might not even have a unified position at all. You've told me how they always argue." Neville nodded in agreement.

Swallowing a bite of his food, Harry said, "Normally, that would be enough to think about for one morning. But not today, I get to go do some open-brain surgery."

"Sounds kind of grim when you put it that way," remarked Ron.

"It feels kind of grim," said Harry. "I mean, his life is in my hands, and if I make one mistake... well, I try not to think about what could happen."

"It's not like that, Harry," said Pansy earnestly. "His life ended, in any way that matters, when he had the Cleansing done. You're just trying to give it back to him. If it doesn't work, then he's no worse off; I don't think you could make him any worse off. Not with love. Even if he ends up not able to function, it would be in a better way than he is now. I'd

rather be dead than the way he is now, I know that. Even before I knew that dead people go where Albus is, I'd have felt that way. You're giving him a chance, not taking one from him. Please, look at it like that."

He nodded reluctantly, and continued working on his food. He didn't feel like eating, and wondered if it was nervousness. Five minutes later, he glanced up as McGonagall stood behind him. "Harry, I know you are not finished, but could I have a word with you?"

He got up and walked with her to the teachers' table. Before she could speak, he said, "I'll be there as soon as I'm done with breakfast." To her raised eyebrows, he added, "Albus told me that you would ask that. He also said you stayed up all night with Professor Snape. You must be tired."

She shook her head. "I had him make me a Wakefulness Potion. It was a good idea, in the sense that it gave him something to do while we waited. Then I had him make a Calming Potion for himself; he reluctantly agreed to do so.

"There is another thing. Professor Snape would very much like, when you go in, to dispense with any small talk. He told me that he tolerated it in your sessions because he knew they were difficult for you, and chatting first made you comfortable. In this situation, it is he who needs to be comfortable, though we both understand this is stressful for you as well. Nonetheless, the fewer words, the better."

"I shouldn't be surprised," he said. "Not that it matters, but is he any less mad at me than he was yesterday?"

"It is understandable that you would wonder what degree of hostility you will be facing," she said. "He is somewhat less angry with you, though that is not saying much. It is more a feeling of resignation now."

With a wry smile, he said, "You mean, like, what more can you expect from an addle-brained seventeen-year-old."

"Something like that, yes," she agreed, with the barest of smiles.

"Better than yesterday," he said with a small shrug. "I'll be there soon. Oh, by the way, is Archibald still here? There's something I want to talk to him about."

"He thought you might; I happened to run into him earlier. He is still here, so I will ask him to remain for a while. He has plenty of essays to mark, to keep him busy." She paused, seeming to think for a few seconds. "Good luck," she said solemnly. "I do believe that you will do fine." He nodded his thanks, and she gave him a brief pat on the shoulder as she walked away. Harry returned to his seat.

His friends continued the conversation they'd been having while he talked to McGonagall, not disturbing him as he finished his food. After taking his last bite, he looked up at the others. "You all going to the Burrow?"

Some nodded, but Hermione said, "I'm going to stay for a while, get started on correcting the exams; I don't want to leave them all to the last minute. I'll be along later, maybe in time for lunch." Come to my office after you're done with Snape, she sent to Harry nonverbally. He made eye contact with her to indicate his acknowledgment.

Harry stood, saying, "Well, I'm off. See you all later."

"It'll be fine, Harry," said Pansy. Ginny kissed him on the cheek, and looked into his eyes with an expression that conveyed confidence. He thanked them, then headed out of the Great Hall, toward Snape's quarters.

He stood in the hall outside Snape's quarters, getting himself into the same mental state he did before sessions with Snape. Though it was a very different situation, it seemed like a good idea, especially if Snape was going to be emotionally difficult. Five minutes later, he knocked on Snape's door, which opened immediately.

Harry walked in, noticing that Snape's quarters were as spartan as his office. Snape was sitting on his sofa, staring off into space in front of him. Harry walked over and took the chair nearest the sofa as Snape lay down. "Ready?" he asked.

"I would like you to do the Full-Body Bind on me before you begin, so there will be no thrashing," Snape requested evenly. "I would also prefer to be Silenced; if I need to speak, I will look at you."

Harry nodded. "Before I start, I want to see your memory of being Cleansed. I've seen Voldemort's, but it'll be helpful to see yours as well." With a small nod, Snape let Harry know that he could see it any time. "Keep it in the front of your mind; I may want to look at it sometimes."

Well, thought Harry, I know what I'm going to do, as well as I ever will. He put Snape in the Full-Body Bind, Silenced him, then called up the same memory that Voldemort had. Snape started to scream in pain at the very memory, then as Harry applied the energy of love as he had to Voldemort, Snape screamed again, differently; Harry could tell that it was different even though there was no sound. He kept it up, and Snape was unconscious after twenty seconds. Harry continued for another minute, not sure how much longer he should keep going.

With Snape still unconscious, Harry looked again for the memory of Snape's Cleansing, with a little more difficulty now that Snape wasn't assisting him. Finally locating it, he skipped ahead to the second memory Voldemort called up. Harry called it up, and started applying the energy of love to it. He wondered how many memories Voldemort used when doing the Cleansing; he knew he had to be patient. Snape had not yet regained consciousness when Harry had finished-or, he hoped he had finished, it was difficult to know-with that memory. It's much better when he's unconscious, thought Harry. I sure hope it's as effective. He looked for the third memory Voldemort had used when Cleansing Snape...

Responding to his knock, Hermione's office door swung open; Harry entered and sat down heavily into the guest's chair. "Tired?" she asked sympathetically.

He thought for a few seconds. "Kind of like, emotionally tired, or mentally tired. It's a lot of concentration, a lot of pressure."

"How did it go? How's he doing?"

With an expression that suggested that he himself wasn't sure, he replied, "It's hard to know how it went, for now. As for how he's doing... he's very weak, I guess you could say. He had a lot of... pain, discomfort, whatever you want to call it, in the past hour and a half, so even though he's conscious, he's not really with it right now. I don't know how long it'll be before we know anything. McGonagall's with him right now."

"Did you need his help while you did it?" she asked.

"A couple of times I asked him how something felt, if there was any difference between then and a few minutes ago, but

after the first fifteen minutes, he wasn't in any condition to really answer questions. I think it was like, I was rubbing parts of his brain raw, and when you have that kind of pain for that long, it starts getting hard to say that one thing is better or worse than another. I asked him mainly because I wanted to know if an area was done. When I went over an area for the second time, it seemed to cause less pain than the first time, so I took that as a good sign."

Hermione shook her head in amazement. "Well, I guess there's one way we'll know whether it was really successful or not: if, after he's recovered, you can use the Imperius Charm on him successfully, then we'll know."

"Of course, it'll be a while before we try that," he said. "But I see what you mean."

After a short pause, she said, "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable earlier, when I sent you that you shouldn't say anything to Ginny. I wasn't saying you should never tell her, just that I wanted to talk to you first. I was afraid that you'd just sit down this morning and mention it, and she might have a bad reaction."

"I know she's sensitive about it," said Harry, "but wouldn't she be happy that you helped me?"

Hermione's face reflected her uncertainty. "On one level, yes, I'm sure she would. But Harry, this is going to be an issue between you and her. I hope it's not much of one, but you remember what happened on the day of the attempt on Bright."

"But you said she apologized for that later on."

Doing her best to be patient, Hermione said, "She apologized for being snippy with me, not for the feelings she

had. It's really understandable that she'd be sensitive about this, Harry. You and I are really close, and generally, she has no problem with that, partly because she and I are such good friends too. She knows what our relationship is. But since I got Flora, there are now two ways that you and I can communicate without words, and both are arguably very... intimate. I mean, communicating directly with feelings, without words, is wonderful. I wish I could do it with Neville. You made me feel really good that day, and I know I helped a lot last night. I'm not saying I shouldn't have done it; you really needed it, and I was very glad that I could help you. But Ginny may have mixed feelings, and I wanted to make sure you were aware of that."

Harry was still confused, and thinking that he shouldn't be, that there was something obvious he wasn't getting. "Do you mean she'll wish that you hadn't done it?"

"No, I mean she'll wish she could have," explained Hermione. "She'll also wish that you had called her on her pendant and talked to her. You heard what she said earlier, even without knowing that I helped you like I did. If you're in distress, she wants you to reach out to her, so she can help you. It's up to you to decide whether or not to mention to her what I did last night. I'm just saying, if you do, be aware that it could be a sensitive topic. She might not even tell you that she's upset, if she is, because she might be ashamed of feeling that way. Two months ago, it just sort of spilled out, because she was upset."

"But I shouldn't be hiding things like this from her, should I? I mean, I don't feel like there was anything wrong with what happened, but hiding it makes it feel like it was wrong."

She nodded. "I know, that's why the situation is delicate. You probably just didn't think of calling her, you were alone with

your thoughts. Well, not really, but usually people in that situation would be. You didn't ask me for help, I just offered it. You might think, neither of us did anything wrong, so why should she be upset? Well, if she's upset, it wouldn't be at you or me exactly, just the situation—the situation where because of not having a phoenix and not doing Legilimency, she can't have the kind of connection with you that I have. That's not her fault either, it's really understandable. If another woman, even a friend, had those connections with Neville and I didn't, I might feel the same way. It's nobody's fault, but it has to be dealt with, or at least thought about."

Harry took a minute to think. He felt lost, not sure of what to do. "Do you think I should tell her, or not tell her?"

She let out a short sigh. "I don't know. In principle, the best thing to do is tell her, but it's also riskier. She was upset with you last time partly because of the timing of you telling her what you did, after she said it kind of bothered her. Honestly, there are good points and bad points for either one. The reason to tell her would be because you don't want to keep any secrets from her; the reason not to would be that you know it might upset her, and there's no particular need for her to know."

"Have you told Neville, or will you?"

She nodded her acknowledgment of the pertinence of the question. "I haven't had a chance to talk to him privately, but the answer is no, I'm not going to go out of my way to tell him. He isn't as bothered about this subject as Ginny—at least, not that I know of—but I don't see any reason to specifically mention it. If he asked if it's been especially helpful for us to be able to communicate like we do, I'd say yes, and if he asked for an example, I'd tell him. I don't mean for this to be a secret, Harry, or that there's anything

wrong with it. I love Neville, and you love Ginny; they both know that. I just have to think about Neville's feelings in some situations, and you do with Ginny. It's hard for you, for both of you, the way your life is. You just have to decide which one you think is better."

He sighed in mild frustration. "I don't know which is better, that's the problem."

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said sincerely. "I wish I could decide for you, but I can't. I would only say that you shouldn't lie. If by some strange chance she asked me if that kind of thing had ever happened, I would tell her the truth, and so should you. If you start lying to each other, even with good intentions, you could lose each other's trust, and that's really bad. Trust me, I know," she added, with a very regretful expression.

"You never lied to Neville," Harry pointed out.

"No, but I did lose his trust—"

"By not telling him something you should have," Harry finished.

"By not telling him that I did something that violated his privacy," responded Hermione. "This isn't the same thing. I had an obligation to tell Neville then, and I didn't. It's not nearly so clear that you have any particular obligation to tell Ginny about this. She knows that we communicate by phoenix; we don't go out of our way to mention it every time we do it. Another reason I won't mention it to Neville is that while I'm not trying to hide it, I don't want to rub his nose in it, either. If it comes up naturally, I'll tell him."

Harry still felt at a loss as to how to deal with the situation. "Well, I'll think about it," he finally said. "It's not as though I

don't have enough to think about anyway, though. I still need to go talk to Archibald, so I suppose I can fit it in between worrying about capital punishment, and about whether Snape will be all right or not."

"Maybe you could ask him about this," she suggested. "He was married for a long time, his opinion would probably be more valuable than mine."

He gave her a 'maybe I will' nod as he stood. He looked down for a second, then looked at her and said, "I really do appreciate what you did. After what we talked about, I feel bad saying this, but talking to Ginny on our hands wouldn't have helped as much as that did. I hadn't realized how weak words are, compared to feelings. I wish I could do that with her, too."

"If it ever comes up, tell her that," urged Hermione. "You can't do the same thing with her, but it'll mean something to her that you'd like to be able to. Even if you think she would know that, you should say it anyway."

He nodded again. "See you back at the Burrow," he said, and left.

As Harry reached for Fawkes' tail feathers, an owl fluttered into view, and settled on his shoulder. "Sorry, Fawkes," said Harry, as Fawkes perched on Harry's free shoulder. He started to walk toward McGonagall's office, but the owl took flight, heading in another direction. Ah, she must be somewhere else, he thought. He followed the owl to the Great Hall, where he found McGonagall at the teachers' table.

"I wanted to let you know that a time has been decided for the meeting we discussed," she said. "It will be held at two

p.m. tomorrow, here at Hogwarts, in the Great Hall. Just so you know, the location is being kept secret."

"Okay, thanks," he said. "Oh, Professor... what do you think, about the thing in the paper this morning?"

"Taking a survey, are you?" she asked, with a shrewd expression. "Well, there is enough of Albus in me that I do not support it. Killing is wrong, and while you already know that I will condone it under extraordinary circumstances, I believe that it is possible to keep prisoners in custody without resorting to this. Maximum measures have not yet been attempted, and I do not believe in killing for the sake of revenge, which I believe this would be. This is society's revenge. It is understandable, but it is still revenge."

He nodded. "Thanks."

She hesitated for a moment, then added, "Before I let you go... I am concerned, that if you decide to take this upon yourself..." She trailed off as he nodded, indicating that she needn't continue. "Archibald already talked to me about this. But, thanks."

"We are both concerned, as I am sure others will be. Well, you should go. I will see you tomorrow, and you can contact me on my pendant if you wish." Fawkes took flight, and they were gone.

He was suddenly in the kitchen at the Burrow; Molly and Ginny were talking as Molly prepared lunch. "Harry!" they exclaimed in chorus. Molly stepped over and hugged him tightly, then kissed him on the cheek. Ginny patiently waited her turn, then gave him a long kiss on the lips. "There's more where that came from," she assured him with a smile.

Smiling as well, he replied, "Great, let's go upstairs."

Molly chuckled. "Don't tempt me," responded Ginny.

Looking around, Harry said, "It's good to be back here. It really... feels like home. Funny how you appreciate that when you never really had it."

"It warms my heart to hear you say that, dear," said Molly as she returned her attention to food preparation. "Now, go on into the living room, I think they're waiting for you."

He did, and was soon greeted by Arthur. "Good to see you, Harry," he said. He started to offer his hand, then remembered, and patted Harry on the back instead.

"Good to see you..." Harry trailed off as he looked past Arthur into the living room. He saw Ron, Pansy, Hermione, Neville... and to his shock, sitting at the computer... "Dudley?" he exclaimed, eyebrows rising high.

Enjoying Harry's expression, Dudley got up and approached him, hand extended. "Hi there... come to think of it, maybe I shouldn't get my hand anywhere near you. You might have a flashback," he joked, comically withdrawing his hand slightly.

Ginny stepped over and ostentatiously looked at Dudley's wrist. "No, no bracelet, so it should be okay. But you might want to shake the hand that wasn't badly burned yesterday."

"Yes, Harry's so absent-minded, he'd probably forget, and shake it anyway," said Ron.

"Actually, it's a lot better today, I can move it around with only a little pain—"

"You're still going to St. Mungo's, though," warned Ginny.
"You're not getting out of that."

"If you say so, dear," he joked.

Ginny gave him a 'very funny' look. "Yeah, it doesn't look too bad, compared to that picture in the paper," noted Dudley.
"And before you ask 'what's he doing here?' this is the third time I've been over here in the past few months."

"You gave us his e-mail address, so we've been in contact since we got the computer," explained Arthur. "We've talked a fair bit on the chatting software."

"The what?" asked Harry.

"It's like a computer equivalent to the notebooks you bought for Pansy last year," said Arthur, "it lets people communicate in writing at a distance. Muggles can do more and more things with technology that we do with magic. Anyway, we talked a few times, and Molly and I told him that he should come over some weekend when he was free."

"And Mum wouldn't find out about it," added Dudley. "Not that I can't do what I want, but I just don't need the reaction."

"I can only imagine," agreed Harry, still stunned. "Did you take the fireplace over?"

Dudley nodded. "It turns out there's a public fireplace not too far from Smeltings, so it's no problem. I could do it from home, but I'd have to be careful, obviously. Long as I don't come home a toad, they'll never know."

"Just stay away from Fred and George, you should be fine," joked Ron.

"Now, Dudley, I've told you that that's a misconception, that people don't get turned into toads," admonished Molly.

"Notice she didn't deny the bit about Fred and George," said Ron. "People do get turned into ferrets, though." He went on to explain the reference to Dudley, who laughed.

Harry knew that Arthur's interest in Dudley was mostly due to his general interest in Muggles; he wondered whether Molly's part in getting to know Dudley better was a part of her effort to reconcile Harry and the Dursleys. As for Dudley, he had no idea, and could only guess that Dudley was simply becoming more and more interested in the wizarding world. He wondered if his own fame made it more interesting for Dudley.

"So, you're still reading those internet pages about wizarding?" asked Harry.

"More than that," said Arthur. "He's in contact with some of the people who write them."

Harry's eyebrows shot up again. "And they know who you are?"

Dudley chuckled. "Yes, it's pretty amazing, just being Harry Potter's cousin gets people's interest. I didn't tell them who I was at first, I just said that I was a Muggle with a relative who was a wizard. I got to know them a little bit, then later I told them who I was. They were pretty surprised."

I'll bet, Harry thought. He was impressed that Dudley had even bothered to do that, considering the hostile reaction Harry knew he would receive based on the Skeeter article.

"Do they ask you all kinds of questions about Harry?" asked Pansy, with a teasing glance at Harry.

"A few," he said. "I just tell them that I hadn't seen him much since he went to Hogwarts, and that he was just a normal kid before that. They're more interested in what he's doing now, and I can't tell them much about that."

"But they're reading the Prophet, aren't they?" asked Neville.

"Not only that, they scan it in and put anything interesting on their site," said Dudley. "But they don't believe the Prophet tells them everything. For example, just now, I've been talking to some people. They put up the articles from this morning, which is how I read about it. They're sure there's a lot about what happened that the paper didn't include, that there are a lot of gaps in the story."

"Well, of course," said Hermione. "Some things have to be kept secret, I'm sure they understand the need for that."

"Oh, they know," agreed Dudley. "That doesn't stop them from guessing, though. I think it's kind of fun for them, actually. Right now, the big topic is exactly how you're going to end up defeating Voldemort."

Harry chuckled. "They shouldn't bother, they couldn't possibly guess it."

"Oh, so you know what it is," noted Dudley. "They thought you didn't yet. They said that you said to your class that you would know what to do when the time came, which meant you didn't know what it was. I guess you found out yesterday."

"Don't tell anyone, even that," said Neville. "That's seriously something we don't want Voldemort knowing."

"I don't think Voldemort reads these pages," said Dudley lightly. "They complain that hardly any witches and wizards do. But I won't tell anyone anyway, don't worry. I suppose they could gossip about it directly to others, and it could get out that way. Even then, it would only be a rumor. I think anything that's not in that paper is more or less a rumor."

Harry was stunned again. "How in the world do they know what I said to my classes? And that was only a week ago!"

"Yes, you should be surprised," said Ginny, with a straight face. "No one really takes an interest in anything you say."

"People would find that particular comment very interesting, considering it addressed one thing they really want to know about," pointed out Hermione. "I assume that someone mentioned it in an owl, maybe more than one person, and it spread. It could have even been someone not in that class, but who heard about it from someone who was."

Harry shook his head in amazement. "I guess I'd better be pretty careful what I say, then." He took Ginny's hand and sat on the sofa, putting an arm around her. "Boy, is it nice to be able to do this again," he said, smiling at her. "I kind of got used to it over the summer."

"You sure you don't just want to go upstairs?" smirked Dudley.

Seeing an opportunity too good to pass up, Harry responded, "I'm flattered, Dudley, but I really prefer Ginny."

The other five chuckled as Dudley gave Harry an annoyed look. "I guess I walked right into that one," he admitted as he sat back down at the computer.

Ron, Neville, and Pansy started talking about classes and the end-of-term examinations, while Harry listened, relaxed, and enjoyed holding Ginny. It seemed very strange for Dudley to be around, but Harry knew he wouldn't be there too much over the vacation, if only because it was difficult for him to arrange. Still, he wasn't behaving badly, so Harry supposed he didn't mind.

After about ten minutes, Harry was jolted out of his reverie. "Hey," said Dudley. "I'm talking with a few people in Hogsmeade, and they say their magic isn't working."

Harry and the others exchanged worried glances. "Do you suppose they could have planted lutas in Hogsmeade also?" asked Ginny.

"I can't see why not, it would be easier than getting them into Hogwarts," said Hermione.

"How many people are saying that, Dudley?" asked Arthur.

"Two... no, a third said so too, and he said no one in his family can," said Dudley, looking at the screen intently.

"Arthur," said Harry, "go to the Aurors, get Winston. If we have to go—"

"Shouldn't we go anyway, just as a precaution?" asked Hermione urgently. "I mean, what if—"

"They say there's strange sounds," reported Dudley, as Harry and Ginny stood. "Popping noises... it sounds like they're describing gunfire—"

Fawkes and Flora burst into view, above Harry and Hermione. "Repulsion Charms!" he said unnecessarily as

Ginny and Ron threw arms around his shoulders. Arthur dashed for the fireplace, and they were gone.

On the main road in Hogsmeade, Harry looked around as Hermione, Neville, and Pansy arrived. There were no obvious assailants, but he could now also hear machine gun fire in the distance. "Groups of two, don't worry about Stunning them, just let them shoot," suggested Harry, worried that a lucky shot while a Stunning Spell was being done would hit just as the Repulsion Charm was down. He knew that the Repulsion Charm tended to last for about five seconds if the user wasn't focusing on keeping it going, but he didn't want to take even the smallest chance that one of his friends would become so involved in Stunning attackers that they'd forget to update the Repulsion Charm. Fleetinglly, he realized these were different instructions than he'd given against the mercenaries in September, but he had no time to stop and wonder why.

Harry ran off, Ginny's hand in his, as the other four went the other way down the road, away from Hogwarts. He got closer to the sound of the guns, when suddenly he heard more, from a new direction. He and Ginny turned a corner and saw a man with a gun, his back partially turned from them. Ginny shot off a Stunning Spell immediately, and the man went down.

"Next time, just yell, let him shoot," said Harry, almost shouting, concerned for Ginny's safety. "There could be snipers."

"What's a sniper?" asked Ginny.

Harry ran again, deciding to explain it later. "Look!" he exclaimed. He pointed to a spot four buildings away, where four men with machine guns turned the corner, and started

firing into a home through the windows. He and Ginny broke into a run. He shouted, "Hey! Over here!"

Seeing Harry and Ginny, the gunmen opened fire. It was strange, Harry felt, to run into gunfire rather than dodge away from it. Expecting to see the gunmen go down, Harry was startled to see the scene change dramatically: in an instant, the gunmen were on the ground, wrapped in ropes, and Hermione was standing in front of him and Ginny, two yards away.

They came skidding to a stop. "What the..." gaped Harry. He glanced at Ginny, who pointed to her neck, then to Hermione. Ah, he realized, the time-stopping device.

"It's all under control, and Aurors and St. Mungo's emergency people are here," Hermione informed them. "They're looking for anyone in their homes who might be hurt. Ron, Neville, and Pansy are Apparating people in."

Harry's first thought was to help, but then he had a better idea. "I'm going to Apparate around, see if I can sense any Death Eaters. They wouldn't be attacking, but they might be nearby." As he spoke, he got an impression from Fawkes that Fawkes and Flora had looked around, and hadn't yet seen any lutas nearby. Exchanging a glance with Hermione, he saw that Flora had informed her as well.

"Good idea," said Hermione. "I'm going to go help with moving people, I just wanted to let you know what had happened." She Disapparated.

"Coming?" he asked Ginny.

"You bet. You should Apparate me around, since you're the one who's deciding where to go."

He started to Apparate them from place to place. At the fifth place, the end of the main road of Hogsmeade, there was a man in black robes running toward him. He immediately applied the Imperius Charm, and the man came to a stop a few feet in front of Harry and Ginny.

"Who are you?" asked Harry. "What are you doing?"

"I'm Norbert Simmons," the man replied. "I live over there. I was just taking a walk and I heard the sounds, I was coming back to find out what was going on."

Harry lifted the Charm. "It's all right, it's taken care of," he assured the man. "We're checking for Death Eaters who still might be around, sorry I had to do that."

The man's eyes widened. "That was the Imperius Charm?"

Harry nodded. "Sorry, we have to go."

His hand on Ginny's shoulder, he Disapparated again. In the field where the Sorting had been done, they saw nothing. He Apparated to a place further out of Hogsmeade, and saw another man in a black robe, about twenty yards away, also running, but away from Hogsmeade. Harry Apparated very close to the man, and applied the Imperius Charm; the man collapsed, screaming.

Harry looked toward where the man had been running. He could see nothing except an old tennis racquet on the ground fifteen feet ahead. As the Death Eater stopped screaming and passed out, he ran toward it.

"Harry? What are you doing?"

"This could be a--"

"Harry, no!" screamed Ginny as Harry grabbed the racquet. His world spun, and he was suddenly in a junkyard. He looked around to see if he'd been seen; there were a few people, but apparently his appearance had gone unnoticed. Dropping the racquet, he looked around, and realized his task was hopeless. No doubt one had to find another Portkey to return to base, and there were literally thousands of things that it could be; he couldn't start picking up everything. Frustrated, he picked up the racquet again, and in a second, was back where he had been before.

The Death Eater was in ropes, unconscious. Very anxious, Ginny ran up to Harry. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. "It was just a junkyard. Obviously, to get to Death Eater headquarters, you have to know which item in the junkyard is the Portkey."

"So when you grabbed that thing, you were hoping to be taken to their headquarters?"

"Something like that," he agreed.

Her mouth dropped open in shock and anger. "Are you serious? Do you know how incredibly stupid that was?" she yelled. "Running into Death Eater Central alone, when there could have been a hundred Dark wizards waiting for you? That was your plan?"

"They couldn't have done anything—"

"You're not indestructible!!" she screamed. "You could be killed! And if you keep on doing things like that, you will be! Do you know how hard this is for me, just what happens all the time anyway? How hard it was not to say anything yesterday after you ignored Albus's warning? I didn't say anything about that, because I know why you went, you had

to help the Aurors. If I'd been there, I'd have been begging and pleading for you not to go, but I know you'd have gone anyway. But this? This is so..." she trailed off, at a loss for words.

Harry had never seen her so angry, and felt chagrined, defensive, and angry himself. "I was going to say, they couldn't have done anything before I'd be able to Disapparate away. I wasn't planning on taking all of them on. I was going to Disapparate, and get you guys and the Aurors, and go in."

"Did you hear anything I just said?" she demanded, still shouting. "You're acting like there was no risk in what you did. There was a huge risk! But I'm not only talking about it as something tactical, I'm talking as the person whose life is going to be ruined if you get killed! Would you please think about it like that for a minute? What if I went running off into who knows what danger without a thought? Would that bother you?"

He stared at her, angry and trying to calm down. He didn't answer, because he knew it would bother him. "I have to fight Voldemort, I have to do things like this."

"You have to fight Voldemort, but you *don't* have to do things like this," she said with intensity. "You don't have to go running through every door, not knowing where it'll lead. I know how badly you want to get him--"

"No, you don't!" he shouted, as his chest tightened. He felt tears threaten, and was amazed at how fast it had happened. "I have to..."

Her anger faded somewhat, replaced by sadness and compassion. "No, you don't. You have nothing to make up

for. I know you feel like you do, but you don't. Please, don't do this to yourself."

"I should have had him yesterday," he said quietly, doing his best to hold back his emotions. "Maybe it's 'understandable' that I didn't, but I should have..."

"That's done, Harry. All you can do is what you can do from now forward. If you made a mistake yesterday—and I don't accept that you did—but even if you did, you can only make up for it by doing better, by thinking better. And this was not good thinking, it was a lack of thinking. It was running into a dangerous situation totally blind."

He stared at her, his emotions churning, trying to work out what he thought. She reached out and took his left hand in hers. "Just promise me one thing," she said, her tone very serious. "The next time you want to do something like this, take me with you. Take me, and I won't complain, no matter what you do. If it's safe, there's no harm in taking me, and if it's not, then I'd rather die with you than live alone."

"But you might die, and I might live," he pointed out.

"Then at least, you'd still be alive," she said, looking into his eyes.

"If you were gone, I wouldn't care," he said.

"That's right," she agreed. "Think about that, and put yourself in my position, the next time you do something like what you just tried to do. You'll understand how it makes me feel."

He suddenly understood, in a way he hadn't thought of before. More not thinking, he thought ruefully. Before, if he risked his life, he didn't really think about how it would

affect anyone but himself. He now realized that he had to think about his own life with the value equal to what he placed on Ginny's, because that was what it meant to her, and if it was important to her, it had to be important to him.

She saw the realization in his eyes, and stepped forward to hug him. "I'm sorry," he said, as he buried his head in her shoulder. "As much for not understanding how you feel as for taking the Portkey."

"Relationships are hard, Albus said so when he was alive," she said, holding him tightly. "For someone in your position, who has the burdens you have, it's even harder. It's hard for you to think about how things affect me, because they're so hard for you anyway. I understand that, I really do. I do my best to be tolerant. It's just... sometimes I can't deal with something, like this. So, this happens."

He continued holding her, unable to think of anything to say, except the one thing he could always say. "I love you," he said.

"I love you, too," she answered. She let go of him, then reached up and touched his face. "Let me ask you, and I promise I won't be upset at either answer... if you had to choose between taking that Portkey with me, or not doing it, which would you have done?"

He found that he didn't have to think hard. "I wouldn't have done it."

She nodded slowly. "There you are. I just want you to think of every risk you take for yourself as if it were one for me, too, because it is."

He breathed deeply, then said, "I'm afraid if I do that, I'll be paralyzed with fear. Sometimes I think that not thinking

about the danger I'm in is part of what gets me through it."

"I can understand that. But it still doesn't change how I feel. Maybe there's a middle area somewhere, where you can at least consider it without being paralyzed by it. Just, please, take a second to think about things."

"Everyone keeps telling me that, you'd think I'd listen at some point." Gesturing to the Death Eater on the ground, he said, "Is he still unconscious?"

She leaned over to look at his face. "I think so. Why?"

"I'd be curious to know what caused the magic to go out," he said. He did Legilimens on the man, searching for memories of his mission. At least I don't have to worry about doing this to Death Eaters anymore, he thought, Snape is already blown.

Ginny was silent while he did it. After five minutes, he stood. He walked in the direction of where the Portkey had been, and picked up what looked like a dark stone, except it was shaped like a perfect right triangle, an inch thick, the longest side five inches long. "C'mon, let's get him back to Auror headquarters."

"What's that?" she asked.

Holding it up, he answered, "One of the four pieces of the Four Corners artifact."

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 18, Meeting the Parents: Still uncertain of Snape's fate, Harry feels he has to decide whether to oppose the planned mass execution of Death Eaters, and faces an angry father who blames Harry for his daughter's death.

From Chapter 18: Harry's emotions were in turmoil; he felt as if he had been accused, in front of two hundred people, of responsibility for the deaths that had taken place at Hogwarts since last year. Since becoming a teacher, he had never felt any difficulty in speaking before large audiences... until now. He remembered Hogsmeade, he remembered the bodies of the Slytherins slumped over the sofas and chairs of their common room. He stared, feeling that he didn't know what to say.

18. Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Meeting the Parents

An hour later, Harry took the first bite of one of the sandwiches Molly had made for lunch. "Forty dead," said Neville, shaking his head. They had returned to the Burrow from their debriefing at Auror headquarters twenty minutes ago, except for Harry, who Kingsley had talked to privately for another ten minutes.

"Like Kingsley said, it would have been much more if not for Hermione," said Pansy.

"I just happen to be the one wearing it," protested Hermione.

"You thought of using it," countered Harry. "That's why you have it, and not me. I doubt I would have thought of it."

"Sorry we didn't come back and get you," she said. "I know you would have wanted to help us, but looking for you would have cost more time, and I still don't know how much time this has left, or if it recharges."

"How much time did you end up using it?" asked Dudley. He had already, on their return, asked for every bit of information they could provide. Harry assumed that Dudley's interest was especially high since this was the first wizarding event in which he had been involved, if only peripherally. Not counting the dementors, Harry added to himself, he probably doesn't really want to remember that.

"I think about fifteen minutes," said Hermione, in between bites of potato chips. "A little less than I used it for the wasp attack, so even if it's not rechargeable, if Voldemort was right, it's still got an hour or so left."

"So, what did Kingsley-now, he's the bald, black guy, right? I thought I remembered him-what did he keep you back to tell you?" asked Dudley.

Harry recalled that Dudley had seen Kingsley when Malfoy had been caught. "Just to tell me, not that I didn't know already, that taking that Portkey wasn't the wisest thing I ever did."

"Only less nicely than that, right?" guessed Dudley.

Harry shook his head. "No, he was nice about it, he usually is when he tells me I've done something stupid. He just pointed out that the thing to do was to consult with him immediately, get us all on board right away. He did say that if a fully trained Auror did that, it would mean that they weren't fully trained."

Ron chuckled. "Well, at least he reprimands you with humor. Would it help if I told you that it was a very typical thing for you to do?"

"Since we're talking about something I did that was stupid, no, not really," Harry responded. "But I appreciate the thought."

"No problem. Oh, you said you'd tell us more about what you saw in that Death Eater's mind."

Harry nodded. "A few things, some of which I told Kingsley when I talked to him afterwards. First of all, the Death Eater himself... it was Avery."

"Oh, great," sighed Pansy. She then explained the background to a curious Dudley. "I wonder, who gets to be the one to tell him they're going to execute his father."

"Either his mother, or McGonagall, depending on when it happens," said Neville. "You don't suppose there's any chance they wouldn't execute him, is there? He didn't directly kill anyone."

"He helped put the artifact in place, which led to forty deaths," pointed out Hermione. "But I think right now, just being a Death Eater will do it, it won't matter if they actually did anything."

"And it shouldn't," argued Ron. "Being a Death Eater means you've agreed to become Voldemort's servant, which means you agreed to kill, that you would kill if he told you to. Not that I envy his kid, but they can't make exceptions."

"I know," agreed Pansy. "It's just going to call attention to his family situation among other students, even if it doesn't affect him so much, which it would almost have to."

"It's not good," said Harry. "I wished it hadn't been him, if only for Marcus's sake. Anyway, the most interesting thing I found was that Voldemort did order this... sort of. I say that because he's not really in his right mind right now. Usually he plans operations carefully, but this one was done on the spur of the moment; he just ordered it this morning. Apparently he's been half-crazed since they got him back. The Death Eaters are wondering what in the world I did to him; they can't even guess, but of course they know it was me."

"So, this morning, Voldemort ordered them to do this. He wanted the maximum number of people killed, as soon as possible. One of them tried to tell him that if it was that

easy, they'd have done it already. He said it much more politely than that, but Voldemort still gave him a minute of the Cruciatus Curse just for saying even that much. He told them to use the Four Corners artifact. They were surprised, and they thought it wasn't a good idea, but everyone was afraid to say anything remotely like that."

"Wonder why," said Ron, clearly not bothered at the thought.

"Why was it not a good idea?" wondered Dudley. "After all, it worked."

"The problem wasn't whether it would work," explained Harry. "It was that they were saving it for an attack on Hogwarts, planned for sometime in January. Set it up, take down Hogwarts' defense and magic again, and attack the castle with everything they have. Avery didn't know the details, but he assumed it would involve some giants, and the dementors. It makes sense. So, using it for this was a bad idea for two reasons. Even if we never figured out what took out Hogsmeade's magic, we would know they had something that could, which would warn us to prepare for an attack on the castle."

"But they know you've been teaching combat flying, so you must be thinking about an attack like that," said Ron.

"Yeah, but my preparing for it is different from us knowing that they're going to do it. Anyway, the other reason it was a bad idea is the one that happened: one of them got caught, and a piece of the artifact with him. They had this hugely strategically valuable artifact, and they lost it, because Voldemort wasn't thinking straight. He's still in incredible pain, furious, and scared. He wants someone to pay for what I did, and if it can't be me, or the rest of you..."

Sitting on his right, Hermione gripped his forearm for a few seconds. "Which in no way makes it your fault."

He looked puzzled. "Did you get that from the phoenixes?"

She gave him a sad smile. "No, I got it from knowing you. You start blaming yourself every time there's the smallest causal connection involving you, and people's deaths. You're at the center of this fight, Harry. You hurt him worse than he thought he could be hurt, and he's lashing out. That was bound to happen if things started going against him. It's like those Muggle nature shows; predators are most dangerous when they're wounded and cornered. He may not be cornered yet, but it's getting close, and he's really wounded. We just have to keep up the pressure. Just imagine how many would be dead by now, if not for you."

Harry pondered that in silence, then continued. "Well, that was the main thing I got from Avery's memories. Another thing was that he was nervous about going on this mission, because of the whole business about killing captured Death Eaters."

Ron nodded. "I'm not surprised. I assume that like him, they don't believe in life after death, so that'd scare them pretty bad. Another reason to do it."

Harry wasn't so sure. "They're more scared of Voldemort than of death, though. If he tells them to do something, they'll still do it."

"Still, better to have them scared, though," said Ron. Harry didn't answer, because he didn't feel like discussing the capital punishment issue right then. "Seems more likely that it'll happen now, anyway."

"That's very true," agreed Hermione. "People were already angry, and this is only going to make them angrier. It'll be harder to find people who oppose this."

"Why would anyone oppose it?" asked Dudley, surprised. "After what they've done..."

Hermione explained her and Harry's reasons for opposing it; Dudley was obviously unimpressed. "Well, that's all noble and everything, but in the meantime, they keep killing people." Harry wasn't surprised that Dudley would take that position; he imagined that Vernon would as well, if the situation involved Muggles instead of wizards. "I kept talking to the people in Hogsmeade after you left, of course. They were like, I hope they kill them all. I can see why they would say that."

"Unfortunately, I can too," said Hermione. "What did Archibald say this morning, Harry?"

"He said I might be able to stop it if I tried really hard." The others looked at him, wanting to know the answer to the next question, but not wanting to ask. "I don't know if I will or not. I'm going to talk to Bright later, see what he thinks. I just... haven't had much time to think about it. Sometimes it seems like each choice is worst, except for the other."

There was silence for a moment, which Molly broke by offering cookies. The topic of conversation changed, and he said nothing for a while.

Two hours later, he stepped out of the fireplace in the Minister of Magic's outer office. The secretary, an older, blonde witch, smiled at him. "The Minister is ready to see you, Professor," she said, gesturing him to the door. Nodding his thanks, he opened it.

Bright got up from his desk and walked over. "It's difficult not to want to shake your hand, it's such a reflex," he said with a grin. "How's it doing?" He gestured Harry to a chair, and they both sat.

"Much better, thanks. Ginny dragged me to St. Mungo's after lunch, and they basically looked at it, said it was doing well, warned me not to touch things, and let me go. Kind of a waste of time, really."

Bright chuckled. "I've had the same experience with Madeline, more than once. Best to do what they tell you, both your spouse and your Healer." Deciding to get down to business, Bright shifted in his chair to a more alert pose. "So, Harry, what brings you here today?"

Harry smiled a little. "That's a joke, right?"

"A small one, yes. Though while I do know what brings you here, I don't know exactly what you plan to say." He looked at Harry expectantly.

"First of all, I want to know how you feel about this. I mean... Archibald did warn me that how you feel and what you plan to do may be two different things, but mainly, I want to know how you feel about it."

Bright nodded slightly; his expression suggested to Harry that he was going to say something Harry wouldn't like. "Yes, they are different things. As for how I feel about it, I don't like it. Like you, I think that killing people is wrong. If I were a dictator, I would say no, we're not going to kill them, and I would draft people from the population to spend a few hours every week guarding them, taking turns, so the prisoners were well guarded, and I would accelerate the building of the prison. I would feel that it would be worth it to avoid having to kill people, as much as they may deserve it.

"But, alas, I'm not a dictator; I'm a politician. I have to believe that Dentus told you that for me, this is a no-brainer, that I'd be stupid not to do it."

"He said that it was possible that for this kind of issue, your personal feelings might influence your decision."

With a small smile, Bright responded, "He's giving me more credit than I deserve, I'm afraid. I've always been very good at separating my personal feelings from my political judgment. It serves me well in politics, though in talking to you, it makes me uncomfortably aware of certain moral drawbacks."

Harry's eyebrows narrowed. "You mean, in this case, you're not going to let your personal feelings influence your decision."

"That's right."

Even though he knew he should have expected the answer, Harry still had a hard time accepting it. "How can you say that?" he demanded, more incredulously than he meant to. "This isn't some question about regulations, or... or whatever, this is about whether or not we kill people! Killing people is supposed to be the worst thing we can do. How can you possibly think only about the politics of it?"

Bright sighed lightly, though he had clearly expected Harry's reaction. "'I'm a politician' sounds like a sarcastic answer, but it's true. When we first met, I told you that—"

"That you would do what got you the most support, I remember," interrupted Harry, not thinking about the fact that he'd just interrupted the Minister of Magic. "But you could do this. Archibald tells me that with my help, you

could stop it, and if things go wrong, any blame would go to me."

"When did you talk to him?" asked Bright.

"This morning, why?"

"Hogsmeade. Things have changed since this morning. In my little bubble here, I can't talk to people, but my assistants have. People have had it, they're boiling mad. They want something to be done--"

"They want revenge!" retorted Harry, raising his voice. "That's exactly why we shouldn't do this! It's totally the wrong reason! The fact that people escape is just an excuse to kill them, because people are mad." Harry paused, thinking, then spoke again. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I will anyway. I don't know if you've been told about what happened with Sirius..."

"He was killed in the Department of Mysteries by Bellatrix Lestrange, and he was innocent when he was sent to Azkaban," Bright supplied.

"Well, I don't know if they told you this, but he was very close to me, as close to a father as I'd ever had. I saw him get killed right in front of my eyes, and I went out of my head. I chased down Lestrange, she taunted me about what she'd done, and I tried to do the Cruciatus Curse on her." Bright's eyebrows went high, but he didn't interrupt. "I learned from that, that revenge doesn't accomplish anything. People won't feel better after the Death Eaters are executed. The relatives of the people who were killed won't feel any better. It won't bring their loved ones back."

Bright regarded Harry very seriously. "No, it won't. And it may not make them feel any better, but it might. What's

true for you may not be true for everyone. But it will make them feel safer, and that's part of what this is about."

"Yes, but if we had caught these Death Eaters before they had done anything, or if they had killed people from some other country, nobody would be wanting them to be executed. Wanting revenge is most of what's causing this. You just said, they're mad. They want to feel safe, but they want someone punished more. It's just like what Voldemort did today. He's in pain, and he wants someone to suffer for it."

Bright spread his hands in a gesture of acknowledgment. "Human nature, Harry. I wasn't trying to argue the merits with you. Like I said, I agree with a lot of what you think. I was just telling you what the situation was out there, and why it may be difficult even for you to do anything to stop it. My training and experience always causes me to look first, and hard, at the reality of the situation. That's not to say I can't see the ethics of it, just that that's not where I look.

"And yes, you're right, it's not impossible that if I were determined I could stop it, especially with your help. And you're also right that killing is about the worst thing we can do as humans. But another thing that's really bad is letting people die. We can't be sure of holding the Death Eaters; that's an objective fact that we can't ignore. Part of what politics is about is the weighing of factors and making judgments."

"Based on political factors," said Harry.

"Mostly, yes," acknowledged Bright.

"Even when the political pressure you're responding to is being made with about as much judgment as I used when I

chased after Bellatrix Lestrange? If so, you're letting a mob help make a decision for you."

"Mobs are groups of citizens, Harry. They have to be listened to, just like everyone else. If they're a mob, there's a reason they became a mob, and that reason is a big part of what I'm responding to. The intensity of their anger reflects the damage that Death Eaters are doing to our society, and I have to respond to that too."

"What would you do," Harry challenged him, "if the politics of this were neutral?"

"Just so you know, as a rule, politicians would rather kill their first-born than answer hypothetical questions. But I'll try to answer." Bright paused, thinking; Harry couldn't help but think that the very fact that Bright was pausing at all said a lot. "Honestly, I don't know. I'd probably support it anyway, but it would be a harder decision. I never pretended that the politics didn't matter. But I would be pretty torn, just like you are right now." Harry's eyebrows went up. "Yes, Harry, I've been checking you. You're the most unlikely person I can think of to lie to me, but when anyone comes in here wanting me to do something incredibly risky, you're damn right I'm going to be checking. You're not lying to me about anything, but I can tell you're ambivalent. You know what the right thing to do is, you just aren't sure if that's what you should do. You're hoping for an ally, someone to fight the fight with you. Well, I'm sorry, but I can't be that. I can't be as idealistic as you. I know what the people put me here to do, and it isn't to do the right thing, it's to reflect their will. The more important the issue, the more important it is that I do that. This may not mean anything to you, but for me, for a politician, doing what the politics tells me to do is roughly the same thing as doing what you think is right is for you. It's not exactly noble, but I do think it's defensible."

Harry said nothing for a minute after Bright stopped speaking, trying to calm himself. He was angry with Bright, but at the same time, he felt that he shouldn't be, since he himself was conflicted. He could understand the general principle of following the will of the people; it just seemed to be a really bad idea in a case like this, where public anger could cause people to collectively act in terribly immoral ways. But then, he thought, who was he to be the judge of what was moral or what was not? Even Dumbledore had said that there was no absolute right and wrong, universally speaking. But this just seemed so obvious...

Calmer now, Harry looked at Bright in an almost pleading way. "It doesn't bother you that this is about revenge? It bothers me."

A small amount of uncertainty showed on Bright's face. "I'd much rather that had nothing to do with it. But if there are two reasons for doing a thing, a good reason and a bad reason, we shouldn't not do it just because the bad reason exists. If people support it for what we feel is the wrong reason, at least we can take solace in knowing that we supported it for the right reasons.

"If it makes you feel any better, Harry, I'm not totally sanguine about this. I'd rather not be the one in this office when the state put thirty-odd people to death. I just feel that this is what I should do, that the circumstances demand it. It makes it easier for me that the politics are what they are, but that aside, I just don't think I can bring myself to endanger lives to uphold a principle, no matter how important that principle is. I'd like to do the right thing. But I can't."

It dawned on Harry that there was no chance for him to change Bright's mind. "Archibald said that I might be able to

stop it by myself. If I tried, would you fight me?"

Bright shook his head sadly. "No, I wouldn't. By the way, that was this morning; if you're serious, you need to talk to him again, Hogsmeade has changed things. You have a lot of clout, but it would be an uphill battle. But I wouldn't fight you. I have enough regard for you that I also wouldn't set myself up to benefit from your fall, though some in the Ministry would; they would know that your position was a likely loser in the long run, and oppose you now in anticipation of being proved right later, so they could score political points. If you did this, I'd just keep a low profile, silently cheer you on, and pray that if you won, there were no more jailbreaks or massacres."

"But you're the Minister of Magic, wouldn't you be the one making the final decision?"

"Sort of," Bright agreed, "but I could, and would, do it in such a way that it was clear that I was responding to the wishes of the people, in this case, those who agreed with you. You would be trying to rally public opinion; my role would be almost that of an arbiter. I would be an impartial judge of whether you had done it or not; you would create the political change that I would be responding to. But I hope you won't do it."

"I thought you'd just as soon not see this happen," Harry pointed out.

"Not for that reason," Bright clarified. "But if there's an escape and more killings—" He cut himself off as Harry nodded.

"Archibald and Professor McGonagall have already mentioned that," he said. "I appreciate it. So, do I need to let

you know if I'm going to do this? I mean, you're going to have to announce your position soon, I'd guess."

"If you do it, letting me know by tomorrow night would be good. Strictly speaking, politically, I should get out in front of this as soon as I can, since I can see where it's going. Tomorrow's Prophet will be full of quotes from Ministry people in loud support; I'll hold off until Monday's Prophet. Partly to give the appearance of thoughtful deliberation, and partly as a subtle signal of my discomfort with it. So... tomorrow night, by eight o'clock, let's say, which is close to the Prophet's deadline."

Harry nodded, and after a few seconds, started to stand, assuming they were finished. Bright held up a hand, indicating that Harry shouldn't go yet. Resuming his seat, Harry looked at Bright expectantly.

"Harry... maybe I shouldn't say this, but somebody should, and I don't know if anyone has. When we first met, I said you were leading the anti-Voldemort forces, and you found that a little difficult to accept. I have a feeling you may accept it now, but I'm wondering if you haven't accepted it a bit too much." Puzzled, Harry wondered what Bright was talking about. "You're acting as though this is only your decision to make. It's not, it's all of us. Yes, a lot of people will follow your lead, and you've earned that. But it doesn't mean that you should necessarily ask them to, that you should substitute your judgment for theirs. And most importantly... if you choose not to fight this, you cannot think that you're responsible, because you might have been able to stop it. If you do choose to fight it, and win, and there are more deaths, you can't think you're responsible for that, either. Just because you're the one who'll probably beat Voldemort doesn't make you responsible for everything. This is not only about you."

Harry still felt responsible, but found that Bright's last comment had gotten to him. "Are you saying that my ego's gotten too big?"

"Not ego in the sense of 'look at me, I'm so great,'" clarified Bright. "But in a way, yes, at least you've come across that way when talking to me. Maybe, ego in the sense of self-importance. You are quite important, of course, so it would be understandable. I just think it's a little worrisome that you've taken this issue upon yourself the way you have. Yes, it may be the greatest moral issue of our generation, and yes, we may be making a mistake. But that doesn't make it yours to fix."

Harry stared off into space, feeling as though he suddenly had too much to think about. He slowly nodded. "Well... I guess I should get going. Thanks for seeing me."

"Any time," said Bright.

* * * * *

Returning via the Burrow's fireplace, Harry quickly explained to Arthur, Molly, Ginny, and Pansy what had happened, then went upstairs to lie down for a while. He entered the bedroom to find Ron looking through his trunk.

"So, how'd it go?"

Harry shook his head as he sat on his bed. Ron nodded, clearly not surprised. "I'd have been shocked if he'd said yes," said Ron. "After you left, Dad was saying he thought it would be a miracle if you got Bright to oppose it. We talked about it a bit."

"How do your parents feel about it?"

"About like you'd expect. Dad's against it, Mum supports it. Neither is totally comfortable with what they think. But with this kind of thing, I feel like if you are totally sure, you're not thinking about it very hard."

"Bright's totally sure, politically, just not morally," reported Harry. "But he's not going to let that stop him. From what you said at breakfast, I guess I don't have to ask how you feel."

Ron nodded solemnly. "Not that I'm happy about it, but yes, I'm okay with it. If I had any doubts at all, there's one thing that puts it over the top for me." Harry could see the emotion in Ron's eyes that Ron was trying to keep off his face. "I don't know if this has occurred to you specifically, but if this happens, Malfoy dies."

Harry felt his own emotion rise as he understood Ron's point: Malfoy had made threats against Pansy that he no doubt still wanted to make good on, and his death was the only way they could be sure that he never would. If he lived, Pansy had to spend the rest of her life wondering if Malfoy might one day escape, hunt her down, and somehow manage to abduct her without the others knowing. It was very unlikely, Harry knew, but not impossible, and that made it something to be taken very seriously.

"No, I hadn't thought about it exactly like that," admitted Harry, feeling ashamed that he hadn't. "I can see why you would. I assume she agrees with you?"

"I think she does, but she hasn't said so exactly. The one time I asked her, she didn't give a direct answer, and changed the subject. Maybe she feels like she's too close to it, I don't know."

Harry recalled that Pansy hadn't spoken up any time the topic of capital punishment had come up, and wondered if this was the reason. He thought about her, about the difference it would make to her life if Malfoy were no longer around. He knew that it didn't make killing the Death Eaters any more right, but he also knew he couldn't ignore it.

Ron looked at Harry, seeming indecisive about whether to say what he was going to say. Finally, emotion clear in both his voice and his eyes, he said, "Harry... she's had nightmares."

Harry winced internally, and closed his eyes. He knew he shouldn't be surprised, since he'd had nightmares about Cedric, and Voldemort returning, and what Pansy had gone through had been worse.

"Do you hope I won't fight this?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," said Ron. "But that wasn't why I told you that. I know how you feel about her. If I were you, thinking about this kind of decision, I'd want to know something like that."

"You're right, I would have wanted to know," agreed Harry. "Do you think Neville cares one way or the other what happens to Lestranger?"

"I don't think so," said Ron. "With him and her, that was just revenge, and I think he's over that, or at least, over it enough. But this isn't revenge, it's prevention."

Nodding, Harry suddenly realized that Pansy's situation had a certain basic similarity to the larger situation: revenge and protection from possible future harm were both possible motivating factors for wanting the Death Eaters to be killed, as well as in Pansy's situation. Pansy's was more direct and more dire, but it seemed to Harry that if he considered

Pansy's protection essential enough to allow Malfoy to die, then he should feel that way about everyone.

Harry spent the rest of the afternoon with Ginny; he tried not to think about the Death Eater situation, but found it hard not to. He paid Kingsley a quick visit before dinner, and found that the Aurors weren't taking an official position, but that a good deal of them had no problem with the Death Eaters being executed. "Losing the five yesterday was more than an emotional blow," Kingsley had explained to Harry. "Out of thirty-eight, five is a huge number to lose, and we're using a certain amount of manpower to keep the Death Eaters we're keeping. We can't be as effective as we'd like to be. Without that tying us down, we can do better."

He talked to Hermione and Neville, and confirmed that they both opposed the executions, though neither was able to say they did unreservedly. Ginny supported them mainly because it would make Harry and the Aurors safer. Fred and George came by for dinner, and Harry found that they supported them unreservedly. They brushed aside Arthur's questions about morality, causing Harry to exchange glances with Ron and Hermione. Fortunately for Harry—he'd wanted everyone's opinion, but was becoming tired of the topic—Molly changed the subject quickly.

The next day after lunch, Harry took Fawkes over to Hogwarts. He found McGonagall at the teachers' table in the otherwise empty Great Hall, having a late lunch. "How's he doing?" he asked.

"It's hard to know, since of course this has never been done before," said McGonagall. "He is... very disoriented, and is in and out of pain. He has been sedated for some of the time, and asleep for much of the time, since he had not slept the

night before. What is the disposition of the other part of him?"

"He wasn't there last night, Albus said he had rejoined himself."

"So, it was successful?" she asked, surprised. "We have seen no hint of that as yet."

"Maybe it's hard for him to get used to having his other half back, or maybe he just needs to recover more for it to happen. Can I see him?"

"Certainly. I was just finishing anyway." She stood, and he followed her out.

"Is he alone right now?" asked Harry.

"Mathilda is with him." To his puzzled glance, she explained, "Healer Haspberg. I do not feel comfortable taking him to St. Mungo's, as his condition is sufficiently rare, and... personal, that I wish as few people to know about it as possible, not to mention its connection to what you plan to do with Voldemort. It cannot be known."

When they arrived at Snape's quarters, he entered after her. They walked through the living area and entered the bedroom. "Minerva... ah, hello, Professor Potter."

"Any change?" asked McGonagall.

"Not really. He's been mostly staring off into space for the past hour, which is better than when he's not." To Harry, she continued, "Minerva has explained all this to me, though not thoroughly, since she tells me that even you can't quite say completely what you did. I've been trying to help him stay comfortable, since that's about all I can do. When he's not

staring off into space, he's usually in pain, and sometimes babbling. About Professor Dumbledore, you, Voldemort, Minerva, and so on. The pain is... the best way I can describe it is that it's as if he's doing something, touching something, then cries in pain and backs away. Not physically, of course, but that is what it sounds like when he does it."

"Maybe he's trying to approach positive memories, and finding that they still cause him pain," suggested McGonagall.

Harry frowned. "I don't know, but it really felt like I did what I should have done. I thought I undid everything Voldemort did. But maybe I didn't do it enough, it's just impossible to know."

"Well, Harry, oddly enough, you're the Healer here," said McGonagall wryly. "No offense," she added to Haspberg.

"None taken, of course," Haspberg assured her.

Shaking his head, Harry said, "I'm not sure what to do." He thought for a minute. "I know one thing to do that's safe. I'll do Legilimency on him, check to see what it is he's seeing when he does this, when he just stares." He pointed his wand at Snape and cast Legilimens.

Two minutes later, he lowered his wand. "What he's doing is viewing old memories, memories of Albus's. But it seems different; I've seen people remembering memories before. It's like, he's totally absorbed in the memory, and isn't aware of anything else. I guess that's why it seems to us that he's staring off into space."

"Why is he doing that?" wondered McGonagall. "Because it's safe?"

"I think so," said Harry. "If I had to guess—and I suppose I do—I'd say that his 'other half' has joined him, but when he goes into his regular consciousness, he feels the pain that Voldemort programmed him to feel if his other half was there. So, I must not have gotten all of it. But the strange thing is, why would his other half have joined him, if his mind wasn't ready for it? Did his other half think I was successful, and I wasn't? Because obviously I wasn't."

"Can we be sure of that?" asked Haspberg.

"The pain he experiences when not viewing memories would seem to indicate that," said McGonagall, "but again, this is so unprecedented, one cannot make any assumptions of any sort."

"There's one way we can find out for sure," said Harry, reluctantly. "I can do the Imperius Charm on him. If I was successful, it shouldn't hurt him. If there's still stuff there, it'll cause him pain. Do you think I should do it?"

McGonagall and Haspberg exchanged blank expressions. "As Minerva said, you are the Healer here. Sometimes Healers have to do things that cause pain in order to get information. If there is no other way to know, then you should do it."

Regretfully, he said, "I'm pretty sure there's no other way to know, so I guess I'd better do it." He leaned over a little toward Snape. "Professor Snape, I'm going to do the Imperius Charm now." Still in what appeared to be a trance, Snape gave no reaction whatsoever to Harry's warning. Hoping for the best, Harry applied the Imperius Charm.

Snape's reaction was immediate: he screamed in pain, in a way roughly similar to how he had when Harry had done it to

him in early September. Frustrated, Harry withdrew the Charm. "Dammit," he exclaimed.

"It is not your fault," said McGonagall softly.

"Do you have any ideas about what to do next?" asked Haspberg.

"I don't see much choice but to do what I did yesterday, again," said Harry, resigned. "I guess it's hard to know just how much to do at once. But I still can't figure out why his other half came back if this wasn't totally done."

"Perhaps the other half felt that you needed a way to know when the procedure was truly done, and he knew that he could take refuge in the memories until such a time as that was done," suggested McGonagall.

"I thought the way I would know it was truly done was when the other half came back," said Harry. "But that seems like the best guess right now. Healer Haspberg, is there something you can give him to put him out? He doesn't need to be conscious when I do this."

Haspberg waved her wand, and Snape's eyes closed. "He should be unconscious for about an hour," she said.

"This shouldn't take that long," said Harry as he sat in the chair next to the bed. "I'm not going to do it for as long as I did yesterday." He cast Legilimens, and began.

Sitting at the teachers' table in the Great Hall, Harry looked out into the audience. Over two hundred people faced him and the others; the tables had been moved out of the Hall, and chairs conjured. Six Aurors lined the walls of the Hall, along with Neville and Ron, in their Auror robes. Harry knew that several more were patrolling the Hogwarts grounds on

brooms. Hogwarts had been chosen as the site for the meeting not because Hogwarts was the topic, but because of its security.

McGonagall introduced Harry and the other teachers present, then gave an opening statement, which took about five minutes. She explained the magical defenses that protected Hogwarts, and assured the parents that all possible measures were being taken to ensure their children's safety. Harry felt that the speech was short on specifics, but he knew that the parents would be asking for more details.

She opened the floor to questions, and a few dozen hands went up. We're going to be here for a while, thought Harry. She pointed at a man, who stood. "I'm Anton Rosenthal, Daniel's father," he announced. "Let me ask the obvious question first: If Hogwarts is so safe, how did five assassins gain access to the castle?"

"As I have explained in the Daily Prophet, Ministry guidelines state that no information regarding our knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of Death Eater methods may be released publicly. I will simply say that the castle is safe."

"Is it more safe, less safe, or as safe as it was ten days ago?" he challenged her.

"I am very sorry, but I have said all I can say in response to your question," she answered, giving him a look that Harry knew well, the one that meant 'you should know better than to ask.' Obviously unconvinced, Rosenthal resumed his seat.

She gestured to a middle-aged woman, who stood. "If you have to choose between the students' safety and what's best in the battle with... the Death Eaters and their leader,

which will you choose?" she asked, a little nervously. Harry realized that she was nervous not because of McGonagall, but because she had considered saying Voldemort's name and... chickened out, thought Harry uncharitably. Clearly not everyone was saying Voldemort's name yet.

"I do not accept that there must be a conflict between the two," said McGonagall. "But I will tell you that the protection of Hogwarts students is my top priority."

Standing as he spoke, not waiting to be called on, a man said, "But you tried to send Harry away when the assassins attacked, and he ended up being the one to catch them. If you were thinking of the students first, wouldn't you have made sure he stayed?"

"Hindsight is all very well," she said irritably, seeming to be making an effort to hide her irritation, and failing. "In the moment, it was clear who their target was; it did not seem out of line to get him to safety. Yes?"

A blond-haired man who looked no older than thirty-five, but Harry assumed must have been older, stood. "My name is Edward Creevey; all three of my children attend this school. We are told—and as you may be aware, my wife and I are what you call 'Muggles,' so some of this is rather new to us—we are told by our children that there is a new type of magical energy based on love, which they all are not far from mastering. They also told us, somewhat reluctantly, that those who manifest that ability are targeted by this Voldemort wizard who threatens your world, and whose hand... er, well, never mind." Some chuckles spread through the Hall, and Harry couldn't help but glance over at Hermione, who gave him a quick grin. "My question is, Professor Potter, should they manifest this ability, exactly how much danger will they be in?"

Harry could sympathize; he imagined that the situation would be confusing for Muggles, and with all three of his children there... "First of all, Mr. Creevey, did your children explain the priority that Voldemort instructed the assassins--"

Harry cut himself off as Creevey nodded. "Yes, they did. But another thing, why was that information not printed in that magical newspaper?"

"The tactic was clearly designed to intimidate students into not learning the energy of love," explained McGonagall. "It was decided that we would do best not to assist Voldemort in his attempts at intimidation by spreading it ourselves. The news spread throughout the school quickly, in any case."

"To answer the question," added Harry, "the more people there are who can do it, the less danger there is for each one. For the ones right now, we think he's highly unlikely to target them individually, but protection has been arranged for them anyway."

Halfway back, along the right side, Winston stood. "Excuse me, I'm Winston Clark. I'm an Auror, but am here today as a parent. You may know that my daughter Helen is one of the three who can do the spells; she's told me about your situation. If your child, any child, becomes able to do the spells, you'll get a visit from an Auror to discuss security arrangements." Harry noticed that Winston didn't mention that the security arrangements were as much for the parents as the children; he could definitely understand why Winston didn't mention it. "Honestly, it's more in the nature of a precaution than anything else."

Looking somewhat, though not completely, reassured, Creevey sat down. McGonagall found another questioner,

and gestured to a dark-skinned man near the back. "I am Rajiv Patil, father of twin seventh-year daughters. My question is also for Professor Potter. Part of your curriculum for your Defense Against the Dark Arts classes is combat flying." This prompted some whispering and quiet comments; apparently many parents had not known. "My daughters have said that you are teaching it in anticipation of a possible attack on the castle. My question is, do you not think that's quite a risky thing even for seventh years to be doing?"

Harry could see that many parents were surprised, and realized that he had to calm most of them down. "First of all, I'm only teaching it to the sixth and seventh years; I wasn't thinking that anyone younger than seventeen would join the battle, if there is one. Secondly, I'm not urging anyone to join; people are completely welcome to return to the common rooms, or whatever place students may be sent."

He was going to continue, but Patil cut him off. "I think you are deliberately misunderstanding me, Professor. I know they can choose not to fight. I am saying that your teaching it may cause many to do so where they would not have otherwise."

Harry couldn't deny that that was probably true, so he decided not to address the point directly. He suddenly had an idea. "Excuse me, everyone. I'm going to ask a question, and I'd like a show of hands. If, during your seventh year at Hogwarts, there had been an attack on the castle, how many of you would have tried to get a broom and go help out?" Harry held his breath as hands slowly went up; he knew he would look bad if very few did. After ten seconds, to Harry's relief, many hands were up.

"About half. That's about what I thought for this class, too. I was concerned that people might do that, but not know what to do once they got out there. I'm not saying people should join; I've made it clear to every class that it isn't something I expect, or especially want. I want everyone to be safe. But for those who want to, like those of you who raised your hands, I want them to be prepared."

A parent near Patil asked him, "Do your daughters want to join?"

Patil nodded. "Yes, both do. I'd rather they didn't, of course, but I know that I can't stop them. I'm proud that they want to, but... well, you are all parents, you know how I feel about it."

This prompted more comments, and another nearby person spoke, standing as he did. "Well, I for one think it's an excellent idea," said a dark-haired man with a thick mustache. "John Andrew Macmillan, father of Ernie, Head Boy of Hogwarts. I applaud Professor Potter's foresight and initiative. We must all fight the forces of darkness, especially when they arrive on one's doorstep." The comment prompted no further reaction, and McGonagall scanned the audience again. She motioned to a man near the front.

He stood. "I'm Raymond Turpin, father of Ellen, a Ravenclaw fifth year. My question is for Professor Potter. I wondered whether you thought it might be a good idea for you to take a sabbatical."

"I'm sorry, a what?"

"A long break," Turpin explained. "My thought was that if you weren't at Hogwarts, the Death Eaters' attention wouldn't be so focused in that direction, and my... remaining daughter would be safer."

Harry winced internally; even if he hadn't seen the accusation in Turpin's eyes, he would have understood it from the question. Before he could answer, McGonagall cut in. "Professor Potter is a student here, and has as much right to attend as anyone else."

"I wasn't questioning his rights, just wondering if he thought it might be a good idea," responded Turpin, with a stony stare at McGonagall. "And my question was directed to him, not you."

Harry's emotions were in turmoil; he felt as if he had been accused, in front of two hundred people, of responsibility for the deaths that had taken place at Hogwarts since last year. Since becoming a teacher, he had never felt any difficulty in speaking before large audiences... until now. He remembered Hogsmeade, he remembered the bodies of the Slytherins slumped over the sofas and chairs of their common room. He stared, feeling that he didn't know what to say.

He had a sudden feeling of calm, of confidence, and realized it was from Hermione. It's not your fault, she sent him. He's grieving, but that doesn't mean it was your fault. Realize what he's going through, and just answer honestly.

Repressing an impulse to look down the table at Hermione, he sent her a feeling of appreciation. He still felt distressed, but with a perspective he hadn't had a few seconds ago. "No. I don't think it would be a good idea."

"You don't think my daughter would be safer?"

After a brief pause, Harry replied, "She might be, in the short run. But she wouldn't be, in the long run. We all wouldn't be. Doing that would only encourage Voldemort to intimidate

other parts of society. We have to have better security, but as much as we can, do what we would normally do."

Anger in his voice, Turpin said, "Excuse me, Professor, but right now I don't care about encouraging him, or about other parts of society. I want to make sure I don't lose another daughter."

The very last thing Harry wanted to do was publicly argue with a parent who had lost a child at Hogwarts, but he felt he had to rebut the notion that he should leave Hogwarts. He could feel Hermione still supporting him, sending him feelings of calm and love. "Sir, do you think that I should have left Hogwarts?" Turpin nodded. "When?" asked Harry.

"Before my daughter died," said Turpin sharply.

Again wincing slightly inside at the accusation, Harry nevertheless continued toward the point he was trying to make. "So, I assume you also think I never should have urged the students to say Voldemort's name. None of this would have ever happened if I hadn't done that. Is that right?"

Looking a little uncertain, Turpin nodded again. "But if I hadn't done that, I would never have discovered the energy of love, which has turned out to be something he's extremely vulnerable to. It's going to be what defeats him. We have to fight him, wherever we are. I happen to be here."

"You might feel differently," shot back Turpin, "if you had lost a child."

The words were out of Harry's mouth before he knew it. "If you think I haven't-" He paused suddenly, realizing his voice was about to break. In the absolute silence, he took a breath, then continued, "...suffered enormously for everyone

who's died here, then you're very wrong. And I've lost people too. Professor Dumbledore, my godfather... not to mention my parents, you might have heard about that." He immediately felt a pang of regret for being snippy with a grieving father, but he thought he had a good point. "We're all in this together, Mr. Turpin. If we start ducking our heads down because he attacks us, or kills people around us, he wins. There's nothing to do but fight back. I know it's horrible, but that's the way it is."

"A different standard should apply to places where there are many children," insisted Turpin, clearly unimpressed.

"This is one of the safest places in the wizarding world," said McGonagall. "The fact that the assassins managed to get in simply points up the fact that Voldemort is very resourceful. At this point, Professor Potter leaving is out of the question. The school is a safer place with him than without him, and there are other targets for Voldemort here as well. You know that all students who have learned to use the energy of love were targets of that attack; should they be required to leave? Or me, for that matter, because I have publicly opposed him and worked against him? And we should not forget that Hogwarts would, with its defenses, be an ideal base of operations for the Death Eaters, and would be a target in any case.

"Hogwarts is an important part of our society," she continued, now addressing the whole Hall, not just Turpin. "It cannot be separated from the rest of it so easily. It is the formative place for our future citizens, our future leaders. I would not like to think of it as a place where we teach our future citizens to hide from danger, to not speak out, to not call evil by its name."

"No, much better that it's a place where children are killed," responded Turpin bitterly. Turning to face the other parents, he raised his voice and asked, "Is there anyone here whose child was killed, like mine was, who agrees with what they're saying?"

There was a silence, then a woman with long, black hair stood. "I have a third-year daughter; my son, then a third year, was one of the four killed in the attack on Hogsmeade last Halloween," she began, at first speaking slowly and nervously; Harry guessed that she'd never spoken in front of so many people before. "Mr. Turpin, you obviously think that Professors Potter and McGonagall can't understand your grief, even though they've both lost people close to them. Believe me, I can. I admit, when my son was killed, at first I blamed Professor Potter, as you clearly do now." Listening, Harry felt his chest tighten. *Albus said they didn't blame me!* "But over time, I realized that they're right. Everything Harry's done has been the right thing to do. I agree that children should be safe, and I pray that nothing happens to my daughter. But I'd rather accept this kind of risk than have them grow up in a world, as all our children have, where they had to be afraid to say any particular wizard's name. There's something very wrong with that."

To Harry's surprise, a few people applauded, and it grew to soon include what he guessed was more than three-quarters of the parents in the Hall. He was gratified at the support, and felt that the most pointed of the questioning was probably over. He struggled to keep his concentration on the proceedings, and off the thing that disturbed him most.

At the end of the meeting, Harry wanted nothing more than to go to his quarters and sit alone for a while. He couldn't, though, because McGonagall had asked all the attending teachers to remain near the exits and chat briefly with

departing parents. Never fond of that kind of activity, Harry gamely did so anyway, Hermione at his side. Most of the comments were complimentary. Harry assured Mr. Creevey that his children would be fine, and asked him to say hello.

Harry was approached by a witch with short, light brown hair. "Professor, I'm Maya Abbott," she said, shaking Harry's hand. "I was very impressed with what you said. May I ask you a question?" Harry nodded. "This seemed a bit off the topic of the meeting, but I would very much like to know, how do you feel about the executions that are being planned?"

A few parents who seemed to have been on their way out paused, interested to see how he answered the question. Not this, not now, he thought, but he knew he had to say something. "I, um, I don't know what I'm going to do about that."

Abbott looked sympathetic, apparently noticing his reluctance, but pressed her question anyway. "I didn't ask you what you would do, Professor. I asked you how you felt."

He sighed, knowing that his answer was unlikely to please her. "What I feel, is that killing is wrong, whether we do it or the Death Eaters do it."

To his surprise, her eyes lit up. "I'm very glad to hear you say that," she enthused. "I think this is wrong, too, but I've been having a hard time finding people who feel the same way—"

"I should bloody well hope so," snapped a man nearby. "After all they've done? I live in Hogsmeade, I know some of the people who were just killed." To Harry, he demanded, "You don't think they should pay for what they've done?"

"Of course I do," he answered, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "I'd just rather we didn't kill them. I know there are good reasons, I just said how I felt."

"If we don't do this, it means we're not serious about the Death Eaters," the man said to Abbott. "We might as well authorize them for every fireplace in the country, let them do what they want. How many more people have to die before we do something?"

"Ethics are not situational," she retorted with distaste. "It's never all right to steal, it's never all right to torture. And it's never all right to kill. At least Harry understands that."

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but the man spoke first. "Is your child here a son or a daughter?"

"Hannah, she's a seventh-year prefect," said Abbott proudly.

"And if you had to kill someone or watch them kill Hannah, what would you do?" the man asked.

"I reject the premise of the question—"

"Because you don't want to answer it," finished the man. "Accept it or not, that's the situation we're in. Or do you not agree with that?" he challenged Harry.

Harry took a deep breath. "No, I do agree, that's almost exactly our situation."

"And if someone was going to kill her?" he prompted, gesturing to Hermione.

"Because of the energy of love, I don't know if I'm capable, literally, of killing. But I would do whatever it took to protect her, whether it was wrong or not." The man nodded in

satisfaction. To Abbott, Harry said, "The cost of doing the right thing in this situation would probably be very high, we have to admit that. I just don't know if I can deal with paying it. I've seen too many innocent people die already. Excuse me." With most of the parents already having left the Hall, Harry headed for the teachers' table.

By the time he got there, the last of the parents had gone. He sat at the table and put his head in his hands. He felt overwhelmed, drained. After a minute, he felt a hand gripping his shoulder, and he didn't have to look to know who it was. Without looking, he patted the hand on his shoulder. He looked up to say something, and gave a start as he saw McGonagall looking down at him.

She chuckled gently at his reaction. "You thought it was Hermione. Understandable, don't worry about it." She took a seat next to him, hand still on his shoulder. "I know that was very difficult for you."

He nodded. "That's putting it mildly. Next time, I won't be so quick to volunteer for something like this."

"I was surprised that you did," she agreed. "I did warn you, though perhaps not enough. Archibald was right, you certainly did take the pressure off of me. Unfortunately, it went straight to you, and I think you are barely in a position to deal with more than you already have."

He thought about Dumbledore, and the sadness came back to him again. "Minerva," he said quietly, "did you know he lied to me about that?"

With a small, sympathetic smile, she met his eyes and said, "You must really be upset, to call me 'Minerva.'" She moved her hand off his shoulder and took his left hand. "I wasn't with him when he met the relatives that day. I do not know

for a fact that he lied; perhaps she did not communicate that to him at that time."

Getting an impression, Harry concentrated for a few seconds. "No, he did lie. He just sent me... I think it was what he was feeling at the time. Sadness, he was so sad... for the relatives, for me." He unconsciously gripped McGonagall's hand a little harder. "It's amazing, communicating this way. It just took a second for me to get what he sent me, but it would probably take a few minutes to say it, and words wouldn't say it as well. He knew I would blame myself, he was afraid I wouldn't be able to handle it, the responsibility I'd feel. He needed me to get through it, I was precarious enough as it was. He chose to save me from the pain I'd feel then if I found out, at the cost of what I feel now. I also get the feeling that he felt that he knew they wouldn't really blame me once they recovered from their grief, so what he said wasn't really that untrue."

"I can very much understand why he did it, Harry. I probably would have done the same."

Harry nodded, staring ahead into the empty Hall. "It helps a lot for him to have sent what he did. It's good for empathy, to be able to feel just what someone else was feeling. He felt bad about lying to me, even though it was to help me. He hated to do it."

"I can well imagine," she agreed. "He was always honest, to a fault. In this case, being honest would have been more of a fault."

They sat in silence for a minute, then Harry's five friends filed in and walked up to the teachers' table. "How are you doing?" asked a concerned Ginny.

"A little better, thanks," he said. Knowing they had come to get him, he asked McGonagall, "Should I go look in on Professor Snape?"

She shook her head. "I'll go relieve Mathilda. I'll let you know if there's anything that seems to require your attention, but in the meantime, let's give it another day before we think about you doing anything more."

He squeezed her hand again before letting go of it and standing. "Thanks." He met his friends at the end of the table, took Ginny's hand, and followed them out.

At the Burrow, Harry relaxed by half-sitting, half-lying on the sofa, Ginny in his arms. The others were in and out of the living room; nobody talked much about the aspect of the meeting that had affected Harry, but they traded impressions of the parents, most of whom they had never met. "Now, I don't wonder anymore how Ernie got like he is," remarked Ron at one point. "Tallyho, and all that."

"He wouldn't be like that if he'd seen half of the stuff we've seen," said Neville confidently. "There's something about grim reality that takes away that kind of..."

"Bravado?" suggested Hermione.

Neville nodded. "Yes, thanks. I always know that if I pause long enough, you'll come up with the word I want."

"If you've said enough of the sentence that I can guess," she said.

Molly came through the fireplace; she had been gone since the meeting, which she had attended. She walked over to Harry, leaned over, and kissed the top of his head. "I'm never promising you anything again," she mock-scolded

him, referring to his earlier insistence that she not stand up to defend him if he was criticized. "It just killed me to have to sit there and listen to that. And the people around me, they were looking at me as if to say, isn't she going to say something?"

"But it wouldn't have looked good, a professor and Head of House's mother getting up to defend him," he pointed out. He knew that she understood that he meant that she was a mother figure to him, and was perceived that way. "And, people would have assumed anything you said was for that reason."

"And, if someone you love is being attacked like that, you don't care," she chided him. "You should know. If someone was saying those things to Ginny, you'd forget about any promises you'd made." Harry nodded in acknowledgment. "I just felt so bad, none of us could do anything to help you."

"Hermione could. As soon as Turpin basically said I was responsible for Lisa's death, she started sending... emotional reinforcement, I guess you'd call it." He looked over at her with appreciation.

"I had a feeling, I was going to ask at some point," said Neville. "I would have been surprised if you weren't. It was so unfair, it seemed like he set up the question just so he could say what he wanted to say, that Harry was responsible. I'm glad you were able to do that."

"Me, too," added Ginny. Harry squeezed Ginny, glad that she wasn't bothered by the use of the phoenixes as she had been before. She reached up and kissed his cheek, then snuggled into his shoulder.

"Let's just hope there won't be any more of those meetings," said Molly.

A while later, Pansy got up and went upstairs. Having been looking for a chance to talk to her alone, Harry went up a few minutes later. He found her in the girls' bedroom. He stuck his head in the door, asking, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," she said, gesturing him to the bed next to hers. "I bet I know what it's about. I think I'm the only one you haven't talked to yet."

"Didn't happen to find you alone. So, what would you do if you were me?"

"Go to Diagon Alley and let myself be fawned over and told how good I am, maybe sign a few autographs," she joked. Turning serious, she said, "Oh, Harry, I'm really not comfortable with the idea of influencing your decision."

"Join the club, I'm not comfortable with the idea of making it," he half-joked. "But I'm stuck with it, so I want your help."

"I just... I don't feel like I can give an unbiased opinion," she admitted. "The thing with Malfoy shouldn't matter to it--"

"Of course it matters," he interjected.

"But if killing people is wrong, and you're right about that, then it shouldn't matter."

"But it does, though," he said firmly. "It's like a personal reminder of what I could be doing. If I risk other people's lives by doing this, I have to risk yours as well. If I were Albus, I probably would. But one thing I've discovered lately is that I'm not Albus. It can't not matter to me, I can't not consider it. And I still want to know what you think."

Pansy sighed in surrender. "I would let them be killed, and I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. You may not be Albus, but you're a lot closer to being him than I am. I feel bad about it, but I can't let the principle bother me that much. And... I'd make the same choice whether they had Malfoy or not, but—and some part of me isn't happy that I feel this way—the fact that this would mean his death makes it more appealing to me."

Harry could see in her eyes her discomfort at feeling that way. "I don't think anyone would blame you for that. What you went through, what you still could... I remember thinking before, after Easter, that the only way you could ever have real peace of mind was if he died, and now, here it is, that very situation."

"And, to make it worse, you get a say in whether it happens or not," she said. "I don't envy you."

"Me neither," he agreed. "And that's why I need to know what you all think. I guess it makes me feel less alone."

"You're never alone," she assured him. "Hermione was right, you're never alone." His eyebrows shot up; he wondered whether she meant what he thought she meant. She noticed his reaction. "Yes, she told me, both about that and what happened the next day. It was really sweet of her."

He nodded, remembering. "It really was. It was like she was lying next to me, holding me, comforting me... but even better than that. The feelings, when you get them directly like that..."

"She also told me about what happened that day, the day we found out about Blaise, and what you did to make her feel better. She was so amazed, she didn't know the power it could have. I have to admit, I'm a little envious, and it

doesn't even involve Ron or me in any way. You know, you really want to be careful what you say to Ginny."

"Do you think I shouldn't have said what I said down there?"

Pansy shook her head. "No, that was exactly the situation where she should do that, and I'm sure Ginny was sincere in what she said. It's just that, as you know, it's very sensitive. I've talked to Ginny about this, too. Since I'm the one not involved, I hear about it from both of them, but it's hard for them to talk to each other; there's too much possibility of a problem. You probably know this, but Ginny feels bad that she feels the way she does about it. She does her best to be understanding, but she can't help being frustrated about this sometimes. And you know, Harry... if I were in her position, I'd feel exactly the same way. You should never be mad at her for feeling the way she does."

"I'm not," he said, sad that Ginny was unhappy in a way he couldn't do anything to change. "Do you think that not telling her about what Hermione did that night was the right thing to do?"

"Yes," said Pansy immediately, her tone suggesting that the answer was obvious. "I think the less you tell her about this, the better."

"I'm just afraid it'll seem like I'm trying to hide things from her."

"I can understand that, but I think she'll understand the reason."

"But, remember... oh, wait, you didn't see that. Back at the end of June, when Snape accepted me as the person to replace Albus, he gave me permission to tell Ginny because he saw that it would make my life really difficult if he didn't.

When she found out, Ginny was unhappy at the idea that she wouldn't have been told, even though it would have been easier for her not to know."

"That's a different situation," argued Pansy. "In that case, it was a difficulty of yours that she could help you with, and she didn't feel bad about being unhappy that your memories would be viewed. Here, it's not a challenge for you; there's nothing she could do to help you, and she feels bad at being upset. Telling her every time it happens may be honest, but it would be unnecessarily hurtful."

He nodded; he still didn't like it, but he couldn't argue with her. Curious, he asked, "How are things going with you and Ron?"

"Oh, I'm sure he's told you all about everything," she joked.

"Yes, you know how he loves talking about relationships," Harry responded with a smile.

"He does better with me, actually," she said. "I think he knows he has to, and he doesn't seem to mind. But we're doing fine. There's no problems, or at least, nothing serious." With a gleam in her eyes, she added, "We're looking forward to spending some time together during the vacation. Which reminds me... Ron would never ask you, but you mentioned having a copy of your Ring of Reduction. Maybe as a little project, you could modify the second room, like you talked about."

Harry chuckled. "That sounds like a good idea. It would be a nice distraction."

"I think Ginny has other ideas for your distraction," teased Pansy. "But thanks. And the sooner the better, we don't have that much vacation left."

"I'll get right on it," he assured her. "And... thanks, for everything."

"Anytime you want to talk, I'm here."

He left, then went to the boys' bedroom and lay on the bed. Thinking about the executions, he found that his mind was 99% made up: he was almost certain that he would decide to do nothing to stop them. He knew that Turpin was grieving, but not totally wrong: Harry did attract danger wherever he went. Those people could easily escape, and he knew he would feel responsible for whatever they did if that happened. He also felt that the man who had argued with Maya Abbott had a good point, that it was more or less a choice between the lives of the Death Eaters and the lives of their future victims. Albus would have done this, thought Harry, he would have led a crusade to stop it. But I don't think I can. I know he said I had to make my own decisions, but I hate this one. They're both terrible. And I do feel like I have blood on my hands if I let this go forward. Everyone will tell me I shouldn't feel like that, but I do. I know Bright said it's not all about me, and he's right. But the fact is that I might be able to stop it. Could I look those people in the eye and tell them that I agreed to their death? He realized that there was one more thing he had to do before he could stop thinking about the situation.

Harry walked down the halls of the Auror compound; Kingsley had given him directions, even though he had been there once before. The prisoners' cells were spread apart to keep them from communicating, even though they were usually Silenced as a matter of course. Harry turned right, and was soon at the cell he remembered.

He stood in front of the cell and saw the figure lying on the simple bed, pointing away from him. He lifted the Silencing,

and spoke. "Hello, Malfoy."

Malfoy sat up with a start; Harry knew that it was probably very rare for him to hear anyone speak. "P- Potter?" he asked, as he turned on his bed to face Harry. His voice cracked a little, as Harry also knew that Malfoy might not have spoken for a long time. "Is that you, or..." Malfoy's eyes narrowed, as if trying to make out some tiny detail.

Harry realized what Malfoy was thinking. "No, it's really me, sorry. Not a Death Eater posing as me, here to break you out. I just wanted to talk."

Malfoy looked at Harry as if he were crazy. "Just came by for a chat, did you?" he asked sarcastically. "Wanted to gloat a bit?"

Harry almost laughed, since that was so far from his purpose. "No," he said. "Maybe I'm here to say goodbye."

"You going somewhere?" sneered Malfoy. "Never to return, I hope?"

"No, it's more like, you're going somewhere," said Harry somberly. "But you will return, according to Professor Dumbledore." On seeing Malfoy's blank yet contemptuous look, Harry realized that Malfoy didn't know. "I forgot, you don't exactly get the Prophet in here. The Ministry is about to decide that all the Death Eaters currently being held are going to be put to death."

Malfoy laughed. "Yeah, tell me another one. The Ministry's way too spineless to do anything like that. They'll be breaking us out any day now."

"They did try, in September," conceded Harry. "Voldemort himself led the attempt, you should be flattered. But we

stopped them. Some people have escaped since you got caught, but you're being held by Aurors." Harry went on to explain in brief the events of the past few months. "So, there have been enough escapes that people are getting fed up with it, they're ready to do anything they have to, to stop it. There's a lot of pressure from the public to execute the Death Eaters we have right now, and it's going to happen, maybe pretty soon. Probably within the next two weeks."

Malfoy was silent for a minute, then looked defiant, "I don't believe you."

"Yes, you do," said Harry; he had been checking since he arrived. "You don't want to, but you do. You can't think of any reason why I'd bother to come in here and lie to you."

Malfoy rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Just because I can't think of a reason doesn't mean there isn't one. And I'm not worried, they'll come and break us out before anything could happen anyway. The Dark Lord won't allow this."

Harry gave a grunt of amusement. "The Dark Lord isn't in much of a position to do anything, he can't even conduct a simple operation competently." He proceeded to explain what he had done to Voldemort; despite Malfoy's attempts to appear as if he dismissed what Harry was saying, he looked stunned. "Hogsmeade, the one this year, was the last straw," concluded Harry. "They lost the artifact, and created enough public anger that the executions will happen."

"Now I'm sure you're lying," said Malfoy smugly. "No one could do that to the Dark Lord, certainly not you."

Harry found that Malfoy wasn't lying. "Not that it matters, but I can show you what I did." Malfoy blanched, as Harry had explained that what he did was very painful. "No, I'm not going to show you by doing it... not exactly." With a

wave of his wand, Harry lifted the Memory Charm he had placed on Malfoy in September. Malfoy gave a start as the memories came flooding back; horror filled his eyes as he clearly realized that Harry was telling the truth.

Harry explained how he had come up with the Imperius Charm, and its effect on Death Eaters. "Doing it to you, and what happened, made me realize that it would have the same effect on Voldemort, or anyone who'd been Cleansed. Yes, I know about that," he added, to another startled look from Malfoy. "When I do it much more intensely, with Legilimency, it basically reverses the Cleansing. By the time I get done with Voldemort, he'll barely be able to have an evil thought, never mind do anything." Harry wasn't sure that that was literally true, but suspected that it might be.

Malfoy remained silent, but it was very plain that he was very frightened, knowing that if Harry wasn't lying about the rest of it, he wasn't lying about the executions, or about Voldemort's current mental capacity. "I'm wondering, Malfoy... if you could have the Cleansing reversed, would you?"

Anger took over Malfoy's face. "Why are you here, Potter?" he snapped. "You didn't just come to say goodbye. Why don't you just do whatever you came here to do and get the hell out." Harry realized that Malfoy felt that he was being toyed with; Harry wondered if he actually was, despite it not being his intention.

Harry almost said, 'Anxious to get back to whatever it was you were doing?' but decided at the last second that it would be gloating, which he didn't want to do. "I've kind of done it already. I know this isn't going to make any sense to you, Malfoy, but since I've taken up your valuable time, I'll explain it anyway." Harry found he couldn't quite hold back

that comment. "I have a lot of influence, and not everyone agrees that we should be killing people. If I tried really hard, I might be able to get them to not do this. I think killing people is wrong, and we shouldn't do it. But I'm not going to fight it, I'm going to let it happen. So I feel kind of responsible, like I'm helping condemn you and the others to death by not doing anything. I felt like if I'm going to do that, I should be able to come here, look you in the eye, and tell you that."

Confusion was dominant on Malfoy's face, followed by anger, an emotion that Harry realized was almost always there, as it was with Snape. "That's got to be the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Harry shrugged. "I told you you wouldn't understand it. You'd have to have a conscience to do that, and I'm not sure you ever had one even before you were Cleansed."

"Conscience is for the weak," spat Malfoy. "The strong survive."

"Which explains why you're here," retorted Harry. "You wouldn't be here if you hadn't decided to go after Dudley. He says hello, by the way, he thinks about you now and then. He bought steel-toed shoes in case he ever runs into you again." Harry decided on the spur of the moment to gloat for a minute on Dudley's behalf. "Anyway, you did what you wanted to do instead of what you were supposed to do, which isn't exactly a sign of strength. You're not strong, Malfoy. You were just born with advantages, like money and power... and one big disadvantage. Like Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott, you were born to a Death Eater. I'm not sure you ever even had a choice." He paused; Malfoy was silent, to Harry's surprise.

"Tell me something, Malfoy... imagine you had a chance to start again, the Cleansing reversed... would you still do to Pansy what you told her you would after you cut her?"

An evil grin came to Malfoy's face; he gazed into the distance for a second, as if recalling a blissful memory. "Oh, Potter, I've had a lot of time to spend here imagining, carefully planning, what I'm going to do to her. And I will. I'll get out of here, and track her down, one day. It's going to take days, it's going to be fantastic. And you know," he added conspiratorially, "it was going to be a surprise, but since we're old pals, I could tell you the first part of it. Get her in the mood a bit. And one of the best parts is, I'm going to make sure I get Weasley, too. He gets to watch."

Harry shook his head sadly. "That's about what I expected, but I just thought I'd ask. No thanks, Malfoy, they've both got better things to do than listen to your sick fantasies. That reminds me, I've got to remember, I'm working on a Ring of Reduction for them. You know, for when they... well, you don't want to hear about that—"

"What an abomination. They deserve each other."

"Oddly enough, that's what I think, too. Glad we found something in common."

"I will, Potter, I'll get out of here and track them down—"

"No, you won't, Malfoy, and here's why," said Harry with more satisfaction than he really wanted to feel. "I lifted the Memory Charm I placed on you in September, but of course I'll have to replace it before I leave, and include this conversation in it. I don't think you'll escape before they execute you, but I know it's not impossible, so the Memory Charm is just to be on the safe side. Now, the reason you'll do nothing even if you escape is that when you get back,

the first thing Voldemort will do is check to make sure his Memory Charm is still intact—which it won't be—and look for new ones. He'll find this one, and won't be able to get through it even with your help, since I'm stronger than him. So, he'll do what he would do if you refused to help him: use the Cruciatus Curse until your mind breaks open. I think it still wouldn't work, but you'd be way past any kind of help by the time he figured that out. So, it's safe to say that you won't be in any position to do anything to Pansy. But after I do the Memory Charm, you'll forget any of this ever happened, and sink back into your awful, disgusting fantasy that keeps you going until they come to execute you—something which, I'm sad to say, I'm becoming more comfortable with every minute.

"Okay, I think I got what I needed. Is there anything you'd like to say—hopefully, that isn't too depraved and violent—before I put the Memory Charm back?"

There was burning anger in Malfoy's eyes. "The next time I see you, Potter, you'll see me, but you won't know it's me until it's too late."

Harry gave a light shrug. "Well, it wasn't depraved, at least. Seems unlikely, though." He pointed his wand at Malfoy and said, "Please remain standing while I do this, it'll just take a second."

Malfoy gave him a defiant look and immediately lay back down on his bed, in the same position he'd been in when Harry arrived. Malfoy never was too bright, thought Harry as he applied the Memory Charm.

Thirty minutes later, sitting on two beds in the boys' bedroom, Harry and his friends exited the Pensieve. "That was a nice touch there, at the end," said Hermione. "I

suppose you wanted him on the bed so he wouldn't wonder why he suddenly changed position."

"Yes, not that it mattered that much, of course," replied Harry. "He wouldn't be able to remember anyway. Just for neatness, I guess."

"I wonder what he meant by that last bit," said Ginny.

"I guessed it was something to do with Polyjuice Potion," suggested Harry, as Hermione nodded. "He's had nothing to do but hatch plots, even if he can't do anything about them."

Harry glanced at Ron and Pansy; he had been watching them when Malfoy's references to them had come up. Seeing his glance, Pansy rolled her eyes. "Harry, please. You can't think anything he said there would bother me. Even if he was free, he couldn't touch me, and as you pointed out, if he gets away he'll end up wishing he'd been executed. I feel very safe, don't worry."

"It wasn't so much that I didn't think you were safe, just that I thought this might have... negative associations," Harry clarified.

"No... I think seeing this may have done me some good, actually. He's just so powerless, and... pathetic, really. All he can do is fantasize about violence all day long. There's just nothing more to his life anymore, it would be sad if it wasn't Malfoy. But he's really earned this. I assume that's why you asked him the question about me.

"But you know, Harry, he did have a choice. He may have been steered in this direction, but we all have choices. Look at Professor Snape, he chose an extremely hard life because

he decided he had made a wrong choice. If he can do that, someone like Malfoy can choose, too." Harry saw her point.

"Are you going to call Bright and tell him you've decided?" asked Hermione.

"I already did," he said. "I told Kingsley at the site, and used one of their fireplaces to tell Bright. Neither had much reaction, but I got the impression that they were both glad that I made this choice."

"They know this hasn't been easy for you," agreed Hermione. "To tell you the truth, I'm glad you made this choice, too." Harry nodded, appreciating the sentiment, that she preferred that he made the choice with less risk to him.

"Seems kind of weird, to think that Malfoy'll be dead soon," remarked Neville.

"Kind of good, you mean," put in Ron. "But yes, I know what you mean. But he won't be the first member of our class who died... just the first one who deserved it."

"Well, Crabbe and Goyle," pointed out Ginny. "But yes, he really deserved it." Turning to Harry, she asked, "How do you feel about the whole thing now?"

He thought for a few seconds. "Like it's not all about me," he finally said. "Rudolphus was right about that, I do take too much on myself. Talking to Malfoy helped me realize that there are other aspects to this. I mean, I knew that, of course, but this made it easier to see. I still think the principle is really important, but I can't be Albus, at least not right now. I guess I'm getting a little more comfortable that I'm not like he was."

"No, you're like you," said Ginny, sitting across from him.
"And I love you."

He smiled. "I love you, too." To the others, he said, "So, why don't we all go in to Diagon Alley tomorrow, have lunch, walk around?"

"I don't know," said Ron. "You know how I hate to be pestered."

"We'll take Polyjuice Potion," joked Harry. "I'll be you, you'll be me."

"And then what?" asked Pansy with a sly smile.

Hermione, Neville, and Ginny broke up laughing, and even Harry laughed a little. Unable to keep a smile off his face, Ron said, "Don't be disgusting." After a second, he added thoughtfully, "Wow, that's disgusting in two ways. Really impressive."

"It's why I couldn't resist," explained Pansy. After another minute, Ron, Pansy, Neville, and Hermione left the room. With Ginny watching, Harry got to work on the extra Ring of Reduction.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 19, Snape and Neville: Neville and Harry have conflict over Harry's dealings with Snape; Harry must face up to another recent serious mistake and its consequences.

From Chapter 19: "According to the reconstruction," continued Kingsley, "twenty seconds pass until we detect the Apparation that was the bait for the trap. The senior Auror gives the order not to go, and we send Dawlish and our other best dark magic detectors out, a few hundred

meters away from the Apparation. We detect the trap, and avoid it."

McGonagall nodded gravely. "And five Aurors do not die." Oh, God, thought Harry, that never occurred to me. Watching the memory, in despair, he buried his head in his hands and struggled to continue to concentrate.

19. Chapter 19

Chapter 19

Snape and Neville

At nine-thirty the next morning, Harry entered Snape's quarters. He found McGonagall in the bedroom, sitting in the chair next to the bed. "How's he doing?"

"No change from yesterday, I'm afraid," said McGonagall. "The only difference is that there is less pain, and more staring off into space. He must be learning not to stray outside the memories."

"That's bad, we have to do something," said Harry.

"I am open to suggestions," offered McGonagall.

Harry sighed, as he didn't have any at the moment. "I'm really not sure what to do. I've done this twice already, with even more intensity than I used with Voldemort. The effects of the Cleansing should be reversed."

"You have done what you have done only when certain memories are summoned," said McGonagall. "Perhaps you need to apply the energy to other areas as well."

He grimaced. "I really don't want to do that. I've thought of that, but the problem is, once I start doing that to anyone I'm not sure Voldemort already affected, there's a risk that I'll do to him what I plan to do to Voldemort. With Voldemort, I'm just going to blanket his entire mind with this, because I have to be sure that the evil has no place to operate from. He won't be the person Tom Riddle used to be, but I can't

worry about that. But with Professor Snape, if I apply love so that in some areas he can't feel negative emotions, he wouldn't be a regular person. I don't want to take that risk."

"Understandable," conceded McGonagall. "But we should do something."

"I can check again with the Imperius Charm. It occurred to me, maybe there will be no pain if he leaves the memories, but he doesn't know. I hate to do it to him, but we really should know."

She nodded her assent, and Harry pointed the wand at Snape, then did the Imperius Charm. Again, Snape screamed in pain, and Harry instantly ceased the spell.

He looked at McGonagall in frustration, then had a sudden idea. He walked over to the far side of the bed, near the room's window. "I'm sorry about that, Professor," he said; Snape showed no reaction. "Professor, could you move over to this side?" Still no reaction. Harry reached for Snape's feet, and pulled him to the side of the bed, put Snape's feet on the floor, and moved him up into a sitting position. Snape offered no help, but no resistance, and stayed sitting after Harry let go of him.

As McGonagall looked on in confusion, Harry said, in a voice slightly louder than usual, "Okay, Professor, Minerva and I are going to go now, for a while. Just stay here, it'll be good for you to be facing the window. See you later." He walked to the bedroom door, which Snape's back was to, putting a finger to his lips and taking McGonagall by the arm, guiding her out of the bedroom without closing the door.

They walked to the door to Snape's quarters. Harry opened the door and shut it loudly, but he and McGonagall stayed inside. Again motioning for McGonagall to stay quiet, Harry

crept back to the bedroom door, McGonagall at his side, glancing at him as if wondering whether he had taken leave of his senses. Harry felt he couldn't blame her.

He took a silent step into the bedroom; Snape was still staring into space, in the direction of the window. Mentally crossing his fingers, Harry raised his wand and applied the Imperius Charm again. There was no reaction for a second, and just as Harry was starting to wonder whether he'd done it properly, Snape stood and turned to face them, his expression one of surprise.

Harry smiled broadly and silently exulted. "I knew it! Well, I suspected it, anyway. Professor Snape, how do you feel?"

"I expect that I should be screaming, but I'm not," he said in a tone of wonder. "I feel... very happy, I believe 'blissful' would be the word, though I have never felt it before, so I cannot be sure. It feels... wonderful."

McGonagall turned to Harry. "Does he feel that way because the reversal has been effective, or because he is under the influence of the Imperius Charm?"

"The second," said Harry. "Professor Snape, the reason you're not screaming is that the reversal was effective; you just didn't know it. It was probably effective the first time I did it. You didn't scream because there was pain; you screamed because you thought there would be pain, and because of that, there was. This time, I just took you by surprise. The reversal was effective; there will be no more pain. Do you understand?"

Snape was smiling, truly happy; Harry had only ever seen that expression on the half of Snape that he had been missing. "I am in command of my faculties right now, more than well enough to understand your question. What you

mean is, do I accept what you are saying, and the answer is yes."

Harry couldn't help smiling at seeing Snape smile, even though it was under the Charm. "I also meant, will you accept it even after I withdraw the Charm."

Snape looked around the room, as if seeing it for the first time. "I wish you didn't have to withdraw it, but I understand. To answer your question, I believe I will accept it, but I am not sure how I will feel once you withdraw the Charm."

"I understand," said Harry. "I want you to keep in mind that you don't have to hide in the memories anymore, that you can stay in your usual consciousness, that there won't be the pain that you thought there would be. It's important that you stay in your usual consciousness, to get used to it. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'll try," said Snape, still happy.

Harry hated to take that away, but knew he had to. "Okay, I'm going to remove the Charm now. Minerva and I will be right here, if you need anything." He lifted the Charm. Snape let out a sharp cry, and fell onto the bed, looking overwhelmed. "Stay with us, Professor," said Harry urgently. "Don't go back into the memories."

Snape made exclamations of severe discomfort as he wrapped himself into the fetal position on the bed. He gasped and writhed.

Deciding he had to find out what Snape was feeling, Harry cast Legilimens, and looked for Snape's memories of the past minute. After viewing them, he spoke to McGonagall. "It isn't exactly pain, it's hard to put into words. It's like a

shock; not an electrical one, but the kind you'd get by jumping into really cold water. But your body gets used to water in a minute; I don't know how long this is going to take. He hasn't had the possibility of feeling these emotions for such a long time, it's like he needs to get used to having that ability again."

McGonagall watched Snape writhe and shiver on the bed; Harry saw the concern on her face. "Is there nothing we can do for him?"

"Yes, there is. Take his hand. Better yet, let him hold you." McGonagall raised an eyebrow at Harry; there was no reaction from Snape. "I just felt what he's feeling, Professor," he said impatiently. "He needs something to hold on to, to focus on. It's an effort for him not to go back to the memories. I'd do it, but I think he'd rather it was you."

She nodded, and sat on the bed. She tentatively reached for him, taking his hand, then giving him a gentle tug. Realizing that she wasn't doing what was necessary and that Snape wasn't going to help, Harry sat on the bed and hauled Snape up by the shoulders into a sitting position. He moved Snape's right arm, draping it around McGonagall's shoulder. She took her cue, moving closer and putting her arms around Snape. "Hold on to her, Professor," said Harry firmly. "Healer's orders."

McGonagall gave him a fleeting look of annoyance, but Snape did hold onto McGonagall more tightly, still saying nothing. Harry cast Legilimens again. "It's helped," he reported. "He's doing what I hoped, he's focusing his attention on holding you. The discomfort isn't any less, he just has something else to focus on now."

McGonagall nodded, and held Snape a little more tightly after he shivered again. They sat in silence; after a minute, she said, "Harry, perhaps you should get Mathilda from St. Mungo's. She could give him something, make him feel it less strongly--"

She cut herself off as Snape shook his head vigorously, startling McGonagall. Harry cast Legilimens again, as it seemed to be the only way to communicate with Snape. After he finished, he said, "He is aware of us, what we're saying, but he's focusing his attention on dealing with this, which he should. He doesn't want Healer Haspberg to do anything partly because of his natural preference not to get outside help for this sort of thing, and partly because he feels that... I think the phrase is, 'the only way out is through,' and making him feel less will just make this take longer, that it should just go how it's going to go. Also, in a way, he welcomes the discomfort, even though it's pretty intense, because of what it represents."

She lifted an eyebrow. "That was a lot of information to get, in a few seconds."

He shrugged. "With Hermione and the phoenixes, I'm getting used to translating feelings into words."

"I would imagine," she agreed. After another silence, she asked, "What made you think of doing that? It seemed like a very odd thing to try."

"Really, I don't know. Maybe it was all the times Albus has talked about how important thoughts are. It just occurred to me that since this is all about what happens in his mind, that sort of idea might be even more important than usual. I thought, what if it did work, and he just doesn't know it?"

That made me think of doing what I did. I'm just glad it worked."

"I suppose we cannot even begin to guess how long this stage of his recovery will take," she said.

"No, we can't. But at least the hardest part is over; now, it seems more like a matter of when, than if." Easy for me to say, he thought, I'm not the one in intense, long-term discomfort. But he'll get through it. He managed for seventeen years, resisting the impulses of being Cleansed. He can do this.

Shortly after Harry returned to the Burrow, the others decided to take Harry up on his suggestion from the day before, and go to Diagon Alley. They spent three hours, and had lunch; Harry had the hamburger he'd been thinking about since Saturday. They were waved at by a few groups of Hogwarts students, and Harry was briefly approached by a few well-wishers, but for the most part they were left alone.

Back at the Burrow, Harry spent more time relaxing, and tried not to think about the executions. Then he spent the rest of the afternoon finishing up the copy of his Ring of Reduction, and gave it to Pansy. Very appreciative, she thanked him and told him that she and Ron would be trying it out as soon as possible.

The next morning, after breakfast and some relaxing ("I have a very heavy schedule of relaxing," he explained to Hermione when she asked him about his vacation plans), he went to see Snape again. Approaching the door to Snape's quarters, he opened the door with his wand. Sitting in a chair, Snape put down the copy of the Prophet he was reading. "Some people knock," he observed dryly.

"Professor!" exclaimed Harry, walking over to the sofa and sitting. "How are you doing?"

"Adequately, I suppose one could say," replied Snape. "Not well, I would admit. I continued to be in a rather high level of discomfort throughout most of yesterday, though it did ease off slightly in the evening. The headmistress insisted that I take something to help me sleep. When I resisted, she threatened to 'get Healer Haspberg or Healer Potter in here, whichever disturbs you the most.' I reluctantly acquiesced, because I knew she would do it."

"Yes, she would," agreed Harry, grinning. "But she was right, you did need to get some sleep."

"I felt that my body's need for sleep would eventually overpower the discomfort, and that it was best that that happen naturally. She pointed out that nothing about the situation was natural. It did not change my feeling about the situation, but I did as she asked anyway. This morning, I felt that the discomfort had eased even more. It is still present, of course, but at the current rate of... healing, I suppose, it may be gone in as soon as two days."

"I hope so, that would be great," Harry enthused.

Snape looked up at the still-grinning Harry, puzzled. "What are you smiling at?"

"You. It's so great to see you like this."

Snape looked even more puzzled. "Like what? I am not laughing, or dancing in the halls. I am not aware that my demeanor is any different than it was."

"Oh, it is," said Harry. "It's in your eyes, the look in your eyes is very different. It used to be that the look in your eyes

was... anger, I guess is the best word. Even if you were doing your best to be polite, your eyes showed anger. I always sort of assumed that was your default emotion. Now, that anger isn't there. Sometimes I can see that you're in discomfort, but your eyes are more neutral, just like anybody else's. You could get angry, of course, you're just not that way all the time."

Snape nodded. "I had not thought of it exactly like that, as I have been in too much discomfort to notice. You are correct, of course, and you were correct about my anger. I had plenty to be angry about, but it was either that, or feel nothing. Even with the discomfort I currently feel, it is as though an oppressive weight has been lifted off my shoulders."

He paused, then looked at Harry, his expression serious. "I would like to thank you for what you have done." Harry smiled again, and felt emotion rise up. After a few seconds, taking on a more casual expression, Snape added, "However, I really cannot bring myself to do so. Perhaps some time in the future."

Puzzled just for a second, Harry was silent, then he started laughing, harder and harder. As his laughter died down, Harry could have sworn he saw the right side of Snape's mouth curl upwards just a fraction, but he wasn't sure. "It was not quite that funny," said Snape, sounding amused.

"Considering the situation, it was very funny," said Harry, still smiling. "Not only that, but it was a deliberate joke, I'd guess your first one in a long time that didn't involve anger or some other negative emotion."

"It may have been my first one ever that did not," corrected Snape. "Even before I was Cleansed, I was angry for a very long time. I imagine that the headmaster warned you that

obvious changes in my temperament might not be apparent."

"Your other half, I guess I should say, the half you were missing, warned me. I guess the idea is that if you were angry a lot even before this was done, you might not be so different once you were restored."

"I did not know how I would feel, of course. For a very long time, I did not imagine that this was possible. By the time I realized that it might be possible, I was in such an emotional state at my activities having been exposed that I was unable to think rationally. In a way, it is as if this suddenly happened, without any opportunity for preparation." Snape spoke calmly and thoughtfully.

"I can only imagine how hard it's been to adapt to," said Harry.

Snape nodded. "Indeed. But as you sensed yesterday, it is a challenge that I relish."

"Let me ask you something," said Harry. "Suppose you had had a choice, before this happened: you could have had Voldemort dead, and you in your old state for the rest of your life; or the current situation, you as you are now and the Voldemort situation undecided. Which would you have picked?"

Snape gave Harry a penetrating look, one that Harry knew well, except for the current lack of anger in this one. He considered the question, then finally answered. Without anger or sympathy, he said, "You really are quite transparent. You would like... not forgiveness, but to feel less responsible for your mistake on the plane with the Dark Lord. And do not look at me like that; if I say his name, it will be in my own time."

Harry cut in before Snape could continue. "I didn't expect you would just start saying his name. If I reacted, it was because of the other thing you said. I didn't say it because I was trying to feel better about what happened. I really am curious about which is, or would have been, more important to you."

"You did not say it for that reason consciously, but that was a part of it," countered Snape. "A perceptive observer can understand your motivations better than you can, I believe. In any case, I cannot absolve you of guilt for your mistake; you must do that yourself." In response to Harry's mildly surprised expression, Snape said, "I did learn a few things from my vast experience viewing the headmaster's memories, and that was one of them. That is one of the very positive aspects of what has happened: at that time, I knew that I was learning things that could be tremendously useful, if only I could use them. It was as though a person without hands was learning to be a carpenter, from a great master carpenter. I imagine that at some point, I may be able to call upon what I learned from him.

"To answer your question... for a very long time, I had no hope of my condition ever being reversed, so my sole *raison d'être* became the Dark Lord's defeat. My obsession was such that had I been given the choice you postulate, I would have chosen the Dark Lord's defeat without giving serious consideration to the alternative. You see, the headmaster told you that I came to him seventeen years ago hoping that the Cleansing could be reversed, but it was not long before I accepted the conclusion that it could not. It was something I could not dare hope for, so I would have had difficulty accepting the premise of such a choice. But had I the same choice to make now, I suspect I would make the selfish choice and opt for the present situation. Feeling what I feel now, it would be very difficult to contemplate returning to

what I was, and there is a reasonable likelihood of your defeating the Dark Lord in the natural course of events, as things stand now."

"I will," said Harry. "You can bet on it."

"I doubt any Aurors would bet against you," commented Snape. "And if the look in your eyes is any indication, neither would I."

Harry tried to decide whether that was an observation or a compliment. Maybe it's both, he thought. He said, "Professor, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your condition right now. For example... could you smile if you wanted to?"

"I could smile before, but I take your meaning. I cannot see why not, but I do not plan to make a special effort to do so; if it happens, it must happen spontaneously. Also, old patterns may persist; despite my ability to have any emotion, some may not occur naturally, especially at first. So do not be overly distressed if you do not see me laughing anytime soon, your sparkling wit notwithstanding."

Harry chuckled at Snape's sarcasm, much easier to appreciate with the edge of anger gone. "Don't worry, I would have assumed you'd be far more likely to laugh at my expense than at something I said. After all, that's the way it is with the other five. My next question is, how do you feel about my father?"

Snape's eyebrows rose. "Are you sure you... I see, you are checking to see that my capacity to feel negative emotions is undamaged. I still detest him, both him and Black. I know you feel that he changed in his later years; I never saw any indication that he had, but then, I almost never encountered him after Hogwarts, not that such a determination would

have changed the way I felt. More than that, I suspect I should not say."

Harry could believe that, and was just as happy to have Snape stop when he did. He hadn't wanted to ask the question, but felt he should. "By the way, this isn't to check on your condition, but I'm just wondering... why did you go after Neville the way you did?"

Snape's reaction was also familiar to Harry: surprise that Harry would be so dense. "I would have thought you understood this from our previous conversations. It was because he was weak; he made himself a target. In my previous condition, it was second nature to seek out targets for emotional harassment, and his reactions made him a prime candidate. And no, before you ask, I will not be doing that any longer, to him or anyone. It was almost not a conscious choice, but something done by instinct. I would have done it much more, left to my natural inclinations."

"I guess that was the whole point, that you had to fight against. So, you don't think there are any problems, anything strange that was a result of what I did?"

"I am not truly in a position to tell, this soon afterwards. There is still the discomfort, of course, but it is somewhat offset by the... 'euphoria' may be too strong a word, of having been restored to normal. But there is nothing in the nature of what you are asking. If there is, I will inform you if it is something I think you can do anything about."

Harry figured that was as much as he was going to get out of Snape. "Okay," he said, deciding that he couldn't think of anything more to ask Snape, and that he shouldn't hang around unless Snape asked him to. "Would you mind if I

dropped in sometimes during vacation, to see how you're doing?"

Snape shrugged lightly. "It should not be necessary, but since you seem to be taking this 'Healer' business seriously, I will indulge you."

"That's very good of you, I appreciate it," Harry replied humorously. Very happy that Snape was doing so much better, he stood and headed for the door.

As Harry opened it to leave, Snape spoke again. "Oh, and Harry, please tell the headmistress that she need not check on me; I will inform her if I need her assistance."

Harry beamed in pleasure. "I will, Professor. And I promise to knock next time."

Ten minutes later, Harry finished relating some of the story to Hermione, Neville, and Pansy; Ron and Ginny were out flying. "He called you 'Harry?'" asked Hermione, mouth open in surprise.

"I couldn't believe it, either," he said. "He was very casual about it, but obviously he knew what he was doing. When I gave her the message, McGonagall looked a lot like you just did. She said it was a high compliment, and that I shouldn't expect him to do it again."

"I guess that, and the joke about thanking you, were his way or letting you know how much he appreciated what you did," she said, still amazed. "You deserve it, of course, you basically gave him his life back. I guess the rest of us can't be quite as happy as you are, but I am happy for him."

"I'm happy for the students he won't torment in the future," said Neville, pointedly declining to say that he was happy

for Snape. Neville had been unimpressed when Harry relayed Snape's answer to the question involving him.

"Neville, he had this unbelievable burden-" started Harry.

"No one pinned him down and made him get Cleansed," retorted Neville. "He chose that."

"Of course, you're right," admitted Harry. "But what he did after that was pretty amazing, more than most people could have done. Obviously it doesn't excuse what he did, but it does explain it."

Neville seemed annoyed, as if being asked to do something he didn't want to do. "Harry, Hermione's told me that you've seen Snape's memories, suffering being tortured, suffering from his condition. So, it's natural that you'd feel sympathy for him. But I haven't seen that, all I've seen of him is him trying to crush my spirit. You can't expect me to suddenly be like, it's so wonderful that he's all right again."

"Neville, I wasn't asking anything of you-"

"It seemed like you were."

"I wasn't. Well, okay, just that you consider what he'd been through when you thought about what he'd done to you. But only because doing that helped me deal with what he'd done to me. Which was quite a bit, as you well know."

Neville grunted in agreement. "From the very first class. 'Clearly, fame isn't everything,'" he intoned, imitating Snape's snide tone more than his voice. "He didn't even say anything to me, and I still wished I could drop the class. He could probably sense it, even without me saying anything."

Harry decided to say nothing more to Neville in Snape's defense. No one said anything for a minute, then Neville said, with the air of one making a concession, "Well, I'm glad you're happy, anyway. I'm going upstairs for a bit."

After Neville was gone, Harry gave Hermione an inquiring look. "Well, you know what Snape's put him through," she said.

"Of course I do, but he isn't usually like that," Harry pointed out.

"We had a... not a fight, but kind of a misunderstanding," she explained. "He isn't in as good a mood as usual."

"Well, we all get like that sometimes," agreed Harry. "I guess I shouldn't expect everyone else to be happy just because I am."

Pansy started to speak, but just as she did, Harry felt his hand tingle, and heard Ginny's voice in his head. "I don't believe you!" she said. "What did you do that for?"

"Oh, good, it came," he said into his hand. "I'll be right there." He excused himself from Hermione and Pansy as Fawkes appeared. He grabbed Fawkes's tail, and the next thing he knew, he was hovering in midair, opposite Ron and Ginny, Ron on his Firebolt, Ginny on Harry's.

Ginny was holding onto a wrapped package, the shape obviously one of a broom. She tore off the wrapping to reveal a Firebolt. "I had a feeling this was what it was. I love it, but why did you do that? You know how I feel about brooms."

"I didn't buy it for you for the same reason I did for him," explained Harry, gesturing to Ron. "With you, it's for a few

reasons. One, because we'll be flying together sometimes, hopefully for a long time, and it's better if we have the same kind of broom. Another reason is just that it's nice." Ginny handed the wrapping to Ron, who Vanished it. She exchanged Harry's broom for the new one, and handed Harry his as he talked; Harry mounted it, and hovered on it as Fawkes disappeared.

"The other big reason," continued Harry, "is that I still think there might be an attack on the castle. It's less likely now, because we got part of that artifact, but it could still happen. I decided to buy this before we got the artifact, but I still think it's a good idea. I've been thinking about, if that happens, what do we do about me."

"You mean, who's with you," said Ron. "I was thinking about that myself. It's hard to decide, because you're both the one that needs to be protected at any cost, and our most powerful offensive weapon. It's like if this were a chess game, you'd be both the king and queen."

"I think Pansy would find a joke in there somewhere," said Harry, as Ron nodded. "But yes, that's right. I accept that I need to be protected, but I also have to have maximum maneuverability. I can't have a group of ten people surrounding me, I'd be too easy to catch. Obviously, once they identify me, they'll gang up on me if they can. So what I want is just the two of you with me. You can watch out for me, let me concentrate on whatever I want to do."

"Because we're good enough fliers to stay with you," said Ginny, "and with the Firebolt, I'll be able to keep up with you at top speed."

"Not to mention that if I tried to tell you to go somewhere else, you'd tell me where to go."

"And not very politely, either," she confirmed. "Glad you understand that."

"I have managed to learn a few things, being with you for most of a year. So, that was part of the reason for this. It just seemed like a good idea overall. And it's not your Christmas present. I didn't want it to be this, because I wanted to get it for you anyway, and I know you didn't want one that badly."

"I will enjoy having it, though, that's for sure," said Ginny happily, as she flew in a few circles around Harry and Ron. "Do you want to join us for a while, or go someplace where I can thank you properly?"

Harry chuckled. "First the first thing, then the second."

"Can you imagine if we three were the Chasers?" asked Ron, impressed at the idea. "We could score at will."

Ginny smiled. "Harry can already—"

"Yes, I know, I saw that coming as soon as I said it," interrupted Ron, rolling his eyes. "It's obvious where your mind is. Really, you two can go, I'll be fine."

"We will, I just want to fly a little first, now that I'm out here," said Harry. "C'mon, I'll fly around and try to lose you, you try to stay with me."

"You'll never lose me," Ginny assured him as he flew off, with her and Ron right behind him.

The next day, he and Neville had their usual daylong training with the Aurors; Harry asked to focus on tactics he could use against giants and airborne Death Eaters. They worked on area-effect spells, though Kingsley warned Harry that they wouldn't work on giants. The Aurors taught them

how to extend the Lumos spell to work like a flashlight, and to Kingsley's surprise, Harry was quickly able to shine a tight beam of light onto a target at a distance of thirty yards, with more brightness than any of them could do. Kingsley felt that it wouldn't do any actual damage, but would distract and anger a giant, which could be useful. He encouraged Harry to practice the spell, to see if he could increase its strength even more.

The day after that, the Burrow emptied somewhat: it was the day before Christmas, and Hermione and Neville went to Hermione's parents' house to spend the afternoon and evening. Ron and Pansy did the same for Pansy's parents, somewhat more reluctantly. Harry hung around with Ginny and read Dumbledore's book in the morning, after which he went to Hogwarts to talk to Snape.

"Come in, Professor," said Snape cordially after opening the door with his wand; it still seemed strange to see Snape acting as a regular person would, even if he wasn't expressive. "Now that most of the recent stressful events are behind you, I assume you are enjoying your vacation?"

"Yes, I am, thanks," said Harry. "Just doing whatever I feel like... flying, working on the extra Ring for Ron and Pansy—"

"I am sure that Mr. Weasley would be delighted to hear that you shared that information with me," said Snape dryly.

Harry gave an 'I suppose you have a point' shrug. "Just used to the idea that you're going to know things like that anyway. Now I have to make an adjustment, just in the other direction. It'll definitely be easier this time."

"One would certainly think so," agreed Snape. "So, how was the meeting with the parents?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I'm surprised that Professor McGonagall—"

Snape raised a hand, cutting Harry off. "Actually, before you get to that, there is a memory I think you should see, from late yesterday."

Harry nodded. "I was going to ask, why not just tell me about it, but I suppose viewing the memory can be more efficient." He took out his wand and cast Legilimens.

Kingsley, McGonagall, and Snape were sitting in McGonagall's office; Snape had clearly begun the memory after the preliminaries of the discussion. "It's about Harry," began Kingsley. "We've been doing the post-mortem on what happened the other day. I assume you know that as a matter of routine, in the wake of important events and operations we Aurors reconstruct the events for dissection, analysis, and so forth."

McGonagall nodded, gesturing for Kingsley to continue. "Well, we also got the memory from Neville about what happened in the classroom before they left. Now, part of the analysis is what we call the 'ideal' version; what would have happened if things had gone exactly as they should? That is to say, if all decisions had been made exactly correctly at every step." Kingsley let out a light sigh indicating his discomfort with what he was about to say, then continued. "Unfortunately, this part wasn't too hard to work out. Dumbledore warns Harry through that ghost, Harry immediately Apparates to the detection room and informs the senior Auror that he's had warning that he's about to receive a call from Aurors and it's a trap. According to the reconstruction, twenty seconds pass until we detect the Apparation that was the bait for the trap. The senior Auror gives the order not to go, and we send Dawlish and our other

best dark magic detectors out, a few hundred meters away from the Apparation. We detect the trap, and avoid it."

McGonagall nodded gravely. "And five Aurors do not die." Oh, God, thought Harry, that never occurred to me. Watching the memory, in despair, he buried his head in his hands and struggled to continue to concentrate. "I assume your question is, should he be told."

"Yes. As I'm sure you know, this is an important diagnostic tool for Aurors. The fact is, few experienced Aurors make instant and correct decisions a large percentage of the time. When we train Aurors, we emphasize that the purpose of a post-mortem is education, not blame. Harry is nowhere near fully trained, and can't be expected to react the way an Auror would. Under other circumstances, I'd just explain this to him, and he'd keep it in mind. But I thought I should get your guidance on this."

"He should be told," said Snape. "This is too important for him not to know."

McGonagall looked doubtful. "He will blame himself. You know that very well."

"He will get over it," Snape responded.

"Is this a clinical assessment," asked McGonagall reproachfully, "or the opinion of one who has the least bit of affection for Harry?"

"What affection I have or do not have for anyone is not up for discussion," replied Snape coldly; in the memory, Harry could feel Snape's anger at the implicit accusation. "I know him better than either of you; my assessment is accurate. Disregard it if you wish."

"Call me an old softie if you wish," retorted McGonagall, "but I will take his emotional condition into consideration, both out of practical concerns and affection."

"The headmaster—"

"Made his greatest mistakes, especially with Harry, when he thought with his heart rather than his head, I know," said McGonagall. "But he has already been through so much, especially in the last few days. He still blames himself for Voldemort getting away. This cannot be piled on top of that; the damage it will do is out of proportion to the benefit it will bring. It can be emphasized to him that he should think better, and he will do his best."

"Lessons are most strongly learned when there is emotional impact," argued Snape, "and this is a lesson he needs to learn strongly. He made two other serious mistakes in the past few days; not using the wand to Disapparate from the plane, and picking up the Portkey. No one can argue that he does not need this point emphasized."

"He knows about both of those already," argued Kingsley. "I know he needs to know, but I'm concerned that the guilt he'd feel would paralyze him in situations in which he needs to act quickly. He could become indecisive. I'm not sure how much guilt, how much pressure, one seventeen-year-old can take. I assume both of you agree that however much we tell him that it wasn't his fault, he'll still blame himself?" Both nodded.

"Professor Snape," said McGonagall, "I know you know him better than either of us. But I tend to agree with Kingsley that there is only so much pressure we should put on him. Look at what he has been through already in the past two

years. Many experienced leaders could not have handled what he has. It is not crucial that he be told this."

"I disagree," responded Snape. "The stakes are so high that even if it gives him a very small amount of extra motivation to think better, it should be done. Think of the possible consequences of the next mistake he makes."

"A mistake he is not necessarily going to make if we don't tell him this," put in Kingsley. "This is partly our fault for emphasizing magic-based training for him and Neville at the expense of decision-making training, which Aurors do get plenty of in the training program. Elaborate scenarios are set up, trainees are put through their paces, and they go through the post-mortems and learn the lessons. We hadn't done this with them, but starting very soon, we will. They'll learn, and they'll do better."

"I am telling you, he can handle it," argued Snape. "Yes, he will blame himself, as he blamed himself for Hogsmeade at first—"

"He made no mistakes at Hogsmeade; that was a different situation," said McGonagall. "And you were the one who said, 'it's Grindelwald all over again.' I doubt he will forget that for quite a while."

Again, Harry could feel Snape's anger. "You know very well the condition I was in when I said that."

"Then do mention it to him, if you would," responded McGonagall with mild sarcasm, clearly anticipating that Snape would do no such thing. "I am sure that your words had an impact; Hermione told me that he had a very bad night that night. Whether due to your comment or not, she told me that he showed indications of holding himself responsible for future deaths. Whether he ends up doing so

or not, I strongly believe that he has more than sufficient incentive to take decision-making more seriously. He does not need an additional burden of irrational guilt to aid him. My decision is that he not be told this. Kingsley, I assume you will keep me informed of the progress of his training?" Kingsley nodded, and the memory stopped.

The feeling of the lead weight in his stomach from a few nights ago came back to Harry, more strongly this time. Five Aurors... He thought for a minute, then looked up at Snape, who was expressionless. "I want to thank you," he said somberly, "for having enough respect for me to argue that I be told. And for telling me, even though she said not to."

Snape shook his head. "Do not thank me so quickly. First of all, you do not think you should be told because it will improve your decision-making process; you think you should be told because you deserve the guilt you feel. I do believe you do not deserve the guilt, though I know my saying that will not stop you from feeling it. I am certain that less than one in a hundred seventeen-year-olds would have reacted any better than you did. Even Professor Granger, the quickest thinker of your group, did not suggest the proper course of action until it was too late. If you blame yourself, you should also blame her and the others, which I know you will not.

"Secondly, I have a suggestion, which if you accept it will result in the headmistress's instructions not having been violated, after a fashion." Harry looked at Snape quizzically. "My thought," explained Snape, "was that, with your permission, I would give you a Memory Charm to cover all this up."

Harry grew even more confused. "Then what good would it have done to show me this, tell me this?"

"Memory Charms cover memories, but they do not eliminate the emotional repercussions of those memories," explained Snape. "For example, a man who witnessed a shocking murder would if given a Memory Charm forget the event itself, but the trauma would remain. He would feel unsafe, unsettled, without knowing why. If I covered this with a Memory—"

"I don't want a—"

"Yes, you would rather feel the guilt," retorted Snape. "Just hear me out. You would retain residual feelings of guilt, but you would ascribe them to the emotional fallout from the events on the plane. You would also retain the strong feeling that you need to pay particular attention to your decision-making skills. In other words, we would get the benefit we desired while avoiding most of the cost. This possibility did not occur to me until after that meeting, though to be honest, I did not suggest it to the headmistress, out of concern that she would reject it as well. I would tell Professor Granger what was done; she would be angry with me for even doing this much, but she would most certainly agree that the Memory Charm should not be broken. Your life would go on much as it would have had I never told you of this, except that you will probably take more care to think carefully in the future."

Harry shook his head. "I'm not going to agree to a Memory Charm. I need to remember this. Besides, you said I could handle it."

"I think you can," agreed Snape, his expression serious. "But that does not mean you should have to. I do know that you will blame yourself more than you should. I have no desire to see you suffer."

Harry knew that for Snape, that was saying a lot. "I know, and I appreciate it. But I just can't duck out of responsibility for something by getting a Memory Charm. I have to deal with this."

"Will you tell the others?" asked Snape.

Harry thought for a few seconds. "No, because they'll just feel responsible, too—"

"If there is a burden, you know they would want to share it with you."

"I know," Harry sighed. "But I can't do that to them—"

Snape's wand flashed; Harry stared straight ahead, disoriented. "If you had said yes, I would not have done this. You need their help, as you have in the past, and will again. You have done much, but you have not done it alone."

Harry shook his head in confusion. "I'm sorry, what are you talking about?"

"Do not ask questions for the moment; just listen. I say what I say now in case you find this and break it in the future. You recall that the headmaster once said that decisions made out of guilt tended to be poor ones; this is one such case. There is simply no reason for you to take on this burden when there is such an alternative as the one I now employ. I apologize for usurping your prerogatives, but I think you will understand my reasons." Snape waved his wand again, and again, Harry stared straight ahead.

After a few seconds of silence, Snape spoke. "Professor?"

Harry snapped out of his stupor, and looked at Snape. "Hmm?"

"You were starting to tell me about the meeting with the parents," said Snape.

"Oh, yeah, right. Well, they were concerned about their kids, of course, but most of them seemed to understand that we have to do what we have to do. I think most of them just needed some reassurance, wanted us to know that they were worried about their kids' safety. Although one of them was... well, pretty determined to blame me." He went on to describe what had happened with Turpin.

"You knew, I hope, not to take him seriously," said Snape dismissively.

"Well, Hermione helped me out, through the phoenixes, and at the time I was able to accept the idea that this just happens in a war, that those deaths weren't my responsibility. But the funny thing is that now, I feel more guilty about it; I have this strong feeling that I was responsible for their deaths, everyone who's died at Hogwarts since this began. I mean, rationally, I know that's not the case, but sometimes your feelings are different from what you know is true."

Snape seemed lost in thought for a few seconds, then responded. "Guilt can be an effective motivator, but one must take care only to feel guilty about things for which one is actually responsible. You must always keep in mind that you have saved far more lives than have been lost."

"Maybe I'm thinking about the plane," Harry suggested. "I am responsible for that."

There was another pause before Snape spoke. "You are responsible for that, but you are not responsible for any deaths caused by the Dark Lord from this time forward. I... I should not have said what I did, about Grindelwald. It is not

an apt comparison, as Professor Granger pointed out. I was not exactly thinking clearly."

Harry was surprised, recognizing the implicit apology. "It's good of you to say that, but I'm not sure you were totally wrong."

"The headmaster went through a great deal of torment and self-recrimination after that event, as you know. He eventually came to the conclusion that he simply should have been more careful. Much of the guilt he felt was unproductive, and avoidable. I am sure he has told you something similar, at night."

Harry nodded. "He did, and in a way, I know he's right. It's just hard to really learn from someone else's experience."

"Well, you may be able to learn from mine," said Snape. His earnest expression was another Harry had never seen before. "I am reasonably sure I know the answer to this, but I would like to be certain. The headmaster told you that soon after I was Cleansed, I came to regret having agreed to it, and made the decision to seek his help and fight against the Dark Lord. Did he ever tell you the reason I did so?"

"No, he didn't. I think he just said that you 'somehow' were able to decide that you wanted to do that."

"As I thought. You know the change that the Cleansing causes; most Death Eaters feel good after the Cleansing, as though they have been given new life, or that they can finally see clearly. It gives them new focus, and they are happy to discard the last shreds of conscience that may have plagued them from time to time; immediately afterwards, I felt the same way.

"About a week after the Cleansing was done, I went to my family home to pick up what possessions of mine were still there, including a few Dark artifacts I still had hidden. My father had recently died. I had not had a good relationship with my mother, though fundamentally I did love her before I was Cleansed, as you know." Harry nodded, recalling that some of the memories Voldemort had used to Cleanse Snape were those of his love for his mother.

"My mother was not in good condition emotionally," Snape continued. "She and my father had had many fights and conflicts, but she still missed him, I believe. I had not been there to be of much assistance after he died, and even though she must have known not to expect this of me, I believe she still resented me for it.

"When I came back, she started to criticize me, for that and for other things. I had borne such criticism before, but had not argued back, tending to remain silent. Newly Cleansed, however, I was in no mood to deal with it. I retorted snidely and ridiculed her, which of course infuriated her. She escalated her criticism, resorting to the clichés that one sees in popular literature. 'I wish you had never been born,' 'You are not my son,' and so forth. I could not be hurt by her words, of course, but I felt it was beneath me to have to listen to her. I told her of the Cleansing, its effect, and that all my weaknesses were now gone, including any feelings I once had for her. Soon she was screaming at me, in full-blown emotional hysteria. She shouted, 'Well, why don't you just kill me. Go ahead, kill me!'"

The blood drained from Harry's face. "Oh, no," he whispered.

Snape nodded. "You must understand—I believe you do already—that saying 'kill me' to a Death Eater is a lot like a naked woman saying 'take me, I'm yours' to a drunk and

aroused man. He will find it very difficult to refuse." Snape paused for a few seconds, and met Harry's eyes. "I did not refuse."

Tears came to Harry's eyes; he closed them, and took a deep breath. "Oh, my God," he muttered. He fought the tears back, and wiped his eyes. He looked up at Snape, whose expression betrayed no emotion. "Can Death Eaters feel guilt?"

"A reasonable question," agreed Snape. "I do not believe it is quite the same. Sadness is required for guilt, and Death Eaters cannot feel sadness. 'Regret' may be closer to the true feeling involved. In the immediate aftermath—by which I mean the first ten or fifteen seconds—I felt powerful, satisfied, the usual reaction of a Death Eater after having killed. Then I looked down at her body, and I started to feel regret. It is difficult to describe exactly what I felt soon after that; having been Cleansed, I could not operate from the full palette of human emotion, and you could not completely comprehend it, for a similar reason.

"Let us just say that I deeply regretted what I had done. To this day I am not certain what made me react differently than other Death Eaters, most of whom I am certain would have felt no regret at all. Even though I did not have a conscience, I decided that what I had done was wrong, or, one could say, not what I would rather have done. I was angry with myself, angry that I seemed to have no control over my own actions. The net effect was similar to what you were told soon after you learned of my situation: I did not have the emotional ability to feel guilt or sadness, but I reacted with other emotions in a way that more or less compensated. Perhaps it could be likened to a sense memory. In any case, after a few days of thought I decided to seek out the headmaster, who I hoped could reverse the

Cleansing. To my amazement, he had great sympathy for me, and did not judge me. He helped me approach the situation a certain way emotionally, partly with the help of what he did for me that you continued after his death.

"He helped me avoid wallowing in regret and self-recrimination; he helped me focus on a new perspective. He helped me refine my Occlumency skill to the extent that I would be able to hide what had happened from the Dark Lord. I focused my energy on that, on controlling my behavior so I could function as a spy, then after the curse against you failed, continuing to function in normal society. You know what effort it took for me to be able to do that, for so many years. With the headmaster's support, I was able to channel my emotions productively."

Still stunned by Snape's story, Harry managed to understand the point. "And you're saying that if you could do it, I can do it."

Snape nodded. "I am telling you that it is very possible; you simply have to be sufficiently determined. Resolve to focus your emotions in a certain way, and keep reminding yourself of it; as you did when you began to focus on love over a year ago. What I did was far more difficult than what I am suggesting you do. I told you this so you would see that it can be done. Do not waste your time and emotion feeling guilty; direct it toward eliminating future errors. Standard Auror training includes exercises in quick reactions and decision-making; you may want to suggest to Mr. Shacklebolt that you take part in such exercises."

"I will," agreed Harry, feeling very determined. "I don't want that to happen again. What happened on the plane, or picking up the Portkey, for that matter." He found that he felt inspired by what Snape had told him, harrowing as it

was. He was amazed that Snape had managed it, but also understood better than before how Snape had developed the motivation to keep up such a high level of effort for such a long time. Harry was sure most people couldn't have done it. "Professor, I'm wondering... why didn't Albus tell me this when he told me about your situation? It would have made it more likely that I'd agree to do it, knowing that."

"I thought he might," said Snape. "You can always ask him, but I strongly suspect that he did not do it because he felt it would constitute naked emotional manipulation, even though it was true. He wanted you to do it because it was a good and right thing to do, not because you felt sorry for me."

Harry nodded. "That makes sense, that would be very much like him." He looked up at Snape again, and he realized for the first time how difficult it must have been for Snape to tell the story, both emotionally and from a privacy standpoint. Somberly, he said, "Professor, I want to thank you for telling me that. Of course I'm not going to tell anyone, even Ginny or Hermione."

"Even the headmistress does not know," said Snape. After a few seconds of silence, he added, "This has a small connection to the grudge I held against your father, even after his death. After I came to regret having been Cleansed, I felt that I might not have been so motivated to delve into Dark magic if not for the need to defend myself against him and Black, and the antagonism they engendered. Of course, rationally I understand that I am responsible for my own actions—you have had with the headmaster variations on this discussion—but as you also know, one often feels more satisfaction in finding others to blame." Harry nodded, feeling he understood Snape a bit better. He knew his father and Sirius were much less responsible than Snape for what

had happened, but he found himself wishing that they had left Snape alone, and wondering how Snape's life would have gone if they had.

Snape spoke again. "There is one thing I would add, however. The emotion I have seen in your eyes over the past few minutes strongly resembles pity. It should not surprise you at all to know that I very much do not wish to be pitied."

"I'm sorry, I do know that. It's just... an emotional reaction, I guess, but I suppose the whole point of this is that we don't have to be ruled by our emotional reactions. Albus is always saying that we can choose what we think, even if it doesn't seem that way."

"He had to work to convince me of that, as I had fewer options as to how to think or feel than most people did. It was only because of his teaching that I managed to do what I did."

"He was an amazing person," said Harry.

"Yes, he is," replied Snape, with a very slight emphasis on the last word.

Harry smiled a little. "Present tense. Yes, he is."

The next day was Christmas Day, and everyone was back, including Fred, George, Bill, and Charlie. It took over an hour to open all the presents, and as was the case the previous year, Harry had a wonderful time. He spent most of the day talking to Ron and Ginny's brothers about their jobs, and answering their questions about his life ("what we don't read in the Prophet, that is," clarified Bill). Hermione and Neville went to St. Mungo's in the afternoon to visit Neville's parents. Harry, Ron, Pansy, and Ginny offered to come along;

Neville thanked them, but preferred that it was just he and Hermione.

While they were gone, Ron asked the others to join him on brooms, including Fred and George. Charlie and Bill came along, curious what they were up to. In the backyard, Ron faced Harry and Ginny. "I was thinking about what we were talking about, with the three of us having Firebolts now. What if we actually did what I mentioned, have the three of us be Chasers? I really think we could crush everyone, and for the first match especially, it would be a hell of a surprise. Ravenclaw wouldn't know what hit them."

"Would we be any good, though?" asked Harry. "After all, Ginny's the only one here with Chaser experience."

"We have flying experience, Harry," said Ron. "It's not that different. Not that being a Chaser is easy," he added hastily, noticing Ginny's indignant look, "but look at what we did the other day. You were doing all kinds of maneuvers to shake us, but we kept with you pretty well. The hardest part of being a Chaser is the coordination while flying, and we can already do that well. Harry and I would just have to practice passing at high speed, and shooting. If we could do that even halfway decently, we could just take the match by the throat. I really think we should think about this."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a grin, amused by Ron's enthusiasm. "I'm game," said Harry, as Ginny nodded.

"Great," enthused Ron. "Fred, George, Charlie, I want you to be opposing Chasers, and Bill, the Keeper."

"But our brooms are nowhere near as good as yours," protested Fred.

"Our opponents' won't be either," said Ron. "It'll be realistic."

"I'm up for the challenge," offered George. "Of course, we may have to use sneaky tactics."

"I'll get our old Beaters' clubs," volunteered Fred, turning toward the house.

"You're going to be Chasers here, not Beaters," pointed out Ron.

"Yes, that's what makes it sneaky," explained George innocently.

"No clubs," said Ron firmly. "I brought a Quaffle, that's all we'll need."

"Well, that's no fun," sulked Fred. "But we still need hoops."

Harry kicked off the ground and flew thirty feet into the air. He then conjured three hoops, setting each one in place with a Hover Charm. Flying closer to the ground, he shouted, "Do the positions look all right?"

"They look fine," Bill shouted back. "How did you do that?"

Harry didn't see why conjuring a few hoops should be so difficult. "We've learned not to ask him that question, he can never explain it," said Ron. "Ready?"

They all flew up into the air, except for Pansy, who stayed on the ground and watched. Since Ginny was the only one with real experience as a Chaser, they were roughly equally matched in terms of skill. Harry would have preferred that they had some practice passing the Quaffle unimpeded, but he knew that the other Weasleys weren't usually available, so it was better to use this opportunity. While not a Chaser, Harry knew the standard attack formations, and was able to execute them well.

At the end of an hour, Fred and George pronounced themselves impressed. "You may not have experience, but I've seen worse Chasers than you and Harry," said George to an obviously pleased Ron. "With those brooms and a little more practice, you'll be unbeatable. The only way anybody would have a chance would be if they got the Snitch in the first five minutes. So, if you do this, who's going to be the Seeker and the Keeper?"

"If we got out to a big lead, like three hundred points, I'd send us back to our original positions," said Ron. "Until then... Katie, Andrew, and Jack all graduated last year, so we have one Chaser and two Beater openings. When we do tryouts for those, I'll have people try out for every position, even Keeper and Seeker, saying that we're thinking about next year, who could move into the positions when Harry and I graduate. I'll also have Dennis try both positions. When the match starts, I'll have Dennis and the new Chaser change positions with Harry and I. We won't practice this at Hogwarts, won't even tell our team until just before the match."

Bill smiled. "Got it all worked out, I see."

"Tell you what," added Charlie. "We'll all be back here on New Year's Day, and so will these two, with Diagon Alley closed for the holiday. You three practice this week, we'll do this again then, see how much better you've gotten."

"Now, that sounds like a good vacation project to me," said Ron enthusiastically. Harry and Ginny nodded in agreement. It wasn't quite so important to Harry that they be certain to win at Quidditch, but he liked the idea of spending time with Ron and Ginny, doing something he enjoyed so much.

* * * * *

The next night, to Harry's surprise, they were joined for dinner by Kingsley, Cassandra, and McGonagall. He wondered whose idea it had been to invite them, but didn't want to ask anyone. About halfway through the meal, the subject of the Death Eater executions came up. At least I've made my decision, he thought, I don't have to agonize over it any more.

"They've picked a date," Kingsley was saying. "December thirtieth."

Harry was startled, as was Hermione. "That's only four days!" she exclaimed. "How are they going to have trials for all of them by then?"

"That's easy," said Kingsley. "There aren't going to be any trials."

Hermione's mouth hung open, and Arthur now looked startled. "No trials? I must say, Kingsley, I don't like this. Bad enough that we're killing them, but to not even have trials... whose decision was that?"

"Bright's, actually," said Kingsley. "I know what you mean, Arthur, but it's actually a principled decision, in its own way. I was in the meeting where it was discussed. One of the undersecretaries was saying something about how many trials we'd have to schedule each day. Bright just said, 'No trials.' The other political people just looked at him; the one who was speaking started to say that it would make it look better, as if justice had been done.

"Bright interrupted him, kind of irritated. He said, 'Yes, I was born longer ago than yesterday, I understand that. But as long as I'm Minister, we aren't going to have any trials where there's only one possible verdict.' He asked me if I was confident that everyone we had in custody was either a

Death Eater, or guilty of attempted murder in the service of Death Eaters; I said I was. He told the undersecretary that a Legilimens would check each of the prisoners sometime before their execution, that he would be satisfied with that."

"Now, that's not going to be a fun job. Who's he going to get to do it?" asked Arthur; Harry winced internally as he wondered whether Bright intended to do it himself.

"I didn't ask right then, of course," said Kingsley. "But I stayed back after everyone had left, and asked him. He was vague, he just said there was someone he had in mind. I was kind of concerned. I said, 'It isn't anyone I know, is it?' He knew who I meant, of course, since there's only one person that he and I both know is a Legilimens. He said, 'Of course not. If he came in here volunteering to do it, I'd tell him to get lost.' I got the feeling he was disappointed in me for thinking that he might ask."

"I'm sure he knew that you were just looking out for Harry," said Molly.

"He does like me, Kingsley, just so you know," Harry assured him. "I've checked him enough to know that. He wouldn't ask that of me, but I appreciate your making sure."

"Ministers of Magic aren't exactly known for looking out for anyone's best interests but their own," pointed out Kingsley. "I didn't really think he would do that; my impression was also that he liked you, but I was just being careful."

"Well, I do see what you mean about the trials," conceded Arthur. "What he means, rather. I had wondered how that would work; to have real trials would take a long time for so many people, and the whole point of doing this is to get rid of them soon. It is principled, in an odd sort of way. It's as if he's saying, 'let's face up to the fact that we're doing

something we shouldn't be proud of.' I can respect that, even if I don't agree with the whole thing."

"There's also the security aspect of it, the executions being so soon," added Kingsley. "Four days is hardly any time for the Death Eaters to gear up for a rescue attempt, and we've got three times the usual number of people watching the prisoners. They aren't going anywhere, but the longer we try to keep up that kind of security, the harder it is."

"Who's going to perform the actual executions?" asked Arthur. Harry realized he hadn't thought about that aspect of it.

"They'll be done by various anonymous people," replied Kingsley. Startled by a sudden thought, Harry unconsciously reached out with Legilimens, then looked at his plate as casually as he could, taking another bite of his food. He wished he hadn't found out what he had, that Kingsley had volunteered for the duty. The flash of memory Harry had seen had also told him that Kingsley hadn't especially wanted to, but had felt it was a kind of duty, as he had approved of the executions, and there weren't that many wizards who could do the Killing Curse.

"Bet there was no shortage of volunteers," commented Ron.

"I believe you would be right about that," said Kingsley. "I don't even know the names, of course, that information is being very closely held. But it wouldn't surprise me at all if some of them were relatives of people the Death Eaters killed."

"It wouldn't surprise me, either," muttered Molly. Arthur gave her a questioning glance; she sighed. "No, I probably wouldn't even if I knew the Killing Curse, but I should. It seems... cowardly to approve of the killings but not be

willing to do it myself." Harry understood that this was Kingsley's reason for volunteering.

"I wish you wouldn't put it quite that way," said Ron uncomfortably.

"She didn't mean you, obviously," said Arthur.

"Of course not, dear," added Molly, now looking as though she regretted having said it.

"But I am seventeen," Ron pointed out. "If it applies to everyone, it should to me as well. Of course, I don't think I could actually do it, because of the energy of love. If Harry had never discovered that, though, I might have been able to do it, if I could have gotten Malfoy in particular. But now, even that idea seems... unappealing."

"I think the energy of love gets you into a certain way of thinking, and then you get used to it," suggested Hermione. "Obviously, approving of something being done and doing it yourself are two very different things." Harry caught Ron giving Pansy a meaningful look, and understood that while Ron found the idea of killing personally to be highly unappealing, he would kill Malfoy himself if that were the only way it could happen.

"It is a very interesting question that Molly raises," said Cassandra. "Should we have to be willing to do this ourselves so that we, in good conscience, can approve it being done on our behalf?"

"It is interesting," agreed Arthur. "On the one hand, we rely on government to do all sorts of things for us so we don't have to, and one of those is to keep order. One could argue that doing morally objectionable things is sometimes necessary to keeping order. On the other hand, if you

wouldn't do it yourself because it's wrong, or harmful, how can you condone someone else doing it so you don't have to?"

"I'm curious, Harry, how would Dumbledore have felt about this?" wondered Cassandra.

"That's a pretty easy question, at least, if you've been talking to him almost every night for the past... wow, it's been six months since he died, I hadn't really thought about it like that... anyway, he would have definitely not asked the government to do anything that he felt was wrong, no matter how much it benefited him, or anyone else. He would have felt that that was the right way to be... for him. He wouldn't have said that we shouldn't do that, just that he shouldn't. He wouldn't have made any judgments about what other people should think, what they should feel was right."

Sitting across from him, McGonagall gave him a little smile. "I cannot tell you, Harry, how many times I heard him say that. 'People must make their own judgments, Minerva.' This usually happened, of course, when I was complaining about some judgment someone had made which I felt was wrong." Now smiling a little at her own expense, she added, slightly conspiratorially, "I remember one occasion when he said that, and I wasn't in the mood for it. I was irritated, and I said, 'What if one of my judgments is that other people should not make the judgments they make?' Just as calm as ever, with that smile that was often in his eyes, he said, 'You must, of course, make that judgment yourself.' And then we both laughed."

Harry was laughing himself. "I can just see it. The strange thing is, I don't think it would be that funny if it was anybody but him, I don't know why."

"Yes, I think you're right," agreed McGonagall. "It was typical of his sense of humor, which was gentle, just like him. He was making fun of both of us, in a way." Glancing down the table, Harry noticed that while some others were smiling, only he and McGonagall had laughed. He wondered if perhaps it was only funny if one had spent a certain amount of time around Dumbledore.

After dinner, they all sat around and talked for a while; one group in the kitchen, and one in the living room, as it was a little difficult for eleven people to sit comfortably in the living room. Arthur showed Kingsley and Cassandra the computer, and the wizarding websites; they discussed how ironic it was that while they posed a threat to wizarding secrecy, they had also been a factor in saving dozens, perhaps hundreds, of lives. Had Dudley not been chatting with residents of Hogsmeade at the time, no one would have gotten there until it was too late. Recalling that Dudley's involvement had been mentioned in Hugo's article the next day, Harry wondered whether Petunia had been sent that article, and if so, what her reaction had been.

About an hour after dinner had ended, the people in the kitchen came into the living room, including Neville and Hermione. They walked up to Harry, who was sitting at one end of the sofa, next to Ginny. "Harry, there's something Neville and I would like you to do for us." She looked a little nervous, and was speaking more loudly than usual, as if everyone needed to hear.

"Sure," he replied, baffled at her manner. "What is it?"

Neville answered. "The Joining of Hands."

It took a few seconds for the request to register, then Harry broke into a wide smile. "I'd love to."

Around the room, people were smiling. "Oh, my goodness," squeaked Molly happily. "I'm going to cry, I know I am."

"It's all right, Molly, we don't mind," said a smiling Neville. Turning to Harry, he added, "You did learn it, right?"

As Ron, Ginny, and Pansy laughed, Harry fought the urge to pretend he'd forgotten; he didn't want to make jokes about something like that. "I did, in fact, in the last two weeks of the summer." He had wanted to be ready in case they had decided to have it done on Hermione's seventeenth birthday. "You want to do it right now?"

"Whenever you're ready," Hermione encouraged him. Harry wondered why her parents weren't there, but then remembered a conversation they'd had over the summer, in which Hermione had told him that she didn't plan to have her parents witness her Joining of Hands with Neville, as they would think she was too young, despite being an adult in the wizarding world. She planned to include them in her wedding, which she felt would be more meaningful to them anyway.

He stood at one end of the living room, the computer desk behind him; the sofa was moved toward the wall, so there would be more room for people to stand. As everyone stood behind Neville and Hermione, Harry suddenly realized why those particular dinner guests had been chosen. Cassandra and Kingsley were clearly there at Neville's invitation, and McGonagall, at Hermione's. As if on cue, Crookshanks came bounding down the stairs, and Fawkes and Flora suddenly appeared, perching on the end of the sofa nearest Hermione and Neville.

"Well, now that everyone's here..." said an amused Harry. "I assume you've decided..." He trailed off as, facing each

other, they held each other's left hand.

Harry wondered what he should say, then decided he should just say whatever came to his mind, since he hadn't had a chance to prepare. "When Ginny and I did this, in the spring, Albus said it was an honor to do it, since it was the last one he would do, and that it was for Ginny and I. Well, you can imagine how I feel now. This is the first time I've done it, and I get to do it for you two. I'm very, very happy to be able to do this. I'm sure it'll be as much of a joy, and a comfort, for you two as it has been for Ginny and me."

He paused, about to continue, then received an impression from Fawkes; he gasped slightly, trying to keep his composure. "I was just about to say something about the group of people here being small, but Fawkes has just reminded me that this is a larger gathering than... than is apparent to us. Albus is here, of course. And through Albus, then Fawkes, then me, Frank and Alice want it to be known that they're here as well. They said..." Harry paused to catch his breath, as he felt a tear roll down his cheek, and he could see that he was far from the only one so affected. Struggling to keep his voice steady, he continued, "They're asking me to thank Neville and Hermione for telling them first, yesterday afternoon. And to say that they couldn't be happier."

Both now crying freely, Neville and Hermione stepped forward and hugged each other, heads on each other's shoulders. Molly, Cassandra, and most of Harry's friends were all crying as well; Ron, Kingsley, Arthur, and McGonagall weren't, but seemed to be making serious efforts to avoid doing so. A few more tears escaped Harry, who then smiled as he got another message. "Alice says that if she were here physically, she would be crying, so she appreciates that we're doing it for her."

This was met with laughter, and people stopped crying. As Hermione let go of Neville, Pansy stepped up to her and joked, "I bet you don't have enough tissues for everyone." Hermione laughed, and Molly passed around a box of tissues.

After a few seconds, Harry said, "Okay, I think we're all okay to continue... Neville, Hermione, do you want to..." Neville and Hermione held each other's left hands again, holding them at about shoulder level. Harry took a few seconds to look at both of them, enjoying the love he saw in their eyes. Remembering the instructions in Dumbledore's book, Harry concentrated as he waved his wand over their heads twice, around their hands once, and then very carefully touched the tip of his wand to the sides of both their hands simultaneously. Lowering his wand, Harry simply gestured to them to go ahead and look. They did, and looked as entranced as Harry was sure he and Ginny had. Then they looked at each other, beaming, then stepped forward and kissed each other as the assemblage applauded.

Neville and Hermione turned to Harry; Hermione stepped forward first, and wrapped her arms around him. "I bet Flora and Fawkes loved it," he whispered.

"I bet they did," she said, laughing. "Thank you, so much."

He kissed her on the cheek as he let her go. "Thank you, for asking me." He turned to Neville, who took a step toward Harry and hugged him.

"Thanks for that, and for the message," said Neville with emotion. "Also, thank Albus and Fawkes for me."

"I will," Harry assured him, patting Neville's shoulder as they separated. "And, congratulations."

Ginny hugged Neville, having just finished with Hermione, and then stood next to Harry. They put their arms around each other as they watched Neville and Hermione make their way through the guests, hugging everyone. Ginny leaned into Harry and whispered, "I'm waiting to see what happens when they get to McGonagall."

"You're mean," he whispered back, chuckling.

"Tell me you're not curious too," she responded.

"Well, now I am," he admitted as she laughed. In a few seconds, to Harry's mild surprise, McGonagall hugged both Hermione and Neville. He and Ginny exchanged impressed looks, and they continued enjoying the scene. I don't often get a chance to be this happy, he thought. May as well make the most of it.

The vacation continued to move along quickly, much too quickly for Harry's taste. There were two Auror training sessions in the second week, and Ron tried to get Harry and Ginny outside on brooms twice a day when Harry wasn't training.

On the afternoon of the thirtieth, Molly and Pansy were out shopping; Harry and Ginny suddenly appeared in the living room, holding each other and Fawkes. Sitting on the sofa, Hermione and Neville greeted them, and they sat next to each other in chairs.

"I was going to mention this this morning, but I forgot," said Hermione. "You've said that for your Joining of Hands, there's only one... volume for contacting each other, right? Your hand tingles at just one level of intensity? We've discovered that if we focus, the tingling can get more intense."

"Oh, good," said Harry. "I'm glad it worked."

The others were surprised, especially Ginny. "You did that deliberately?"

Harry nodded. "It was a thought I had when I was reading what Albus wrote about it, that it would be nice to be able to do that, to wake the other person up if you wanted to. When I was doing the spell that night, I added that to the... visualization, I guess you could say. I made it part of what I wanted to do. I wasn't sure whether it would work or not, though."

"You can do that?" asked Ginny, looking at Hermione as well as Harry. "Just change a spell, even a complicated one?"

Harry shrugged. "He can, anyway," said Hermione. "Somehow I don't think I could. I can't even do that dog spell, and he learned it in one minute. I think it's partly because he can't explain how he does it, he just does it. The energy of love does seem to affect him differently than the rest of us."

"I've told you exactly what Albus told me," protested Harry.

"Yes, and it doesn't work," said Hermione, as if Harry were responsible for the fact. "Maybe he knows you're different and that it would work for you, I don't know. But it can't be an energy-of-love thing, because the rest of us can't do it."

"Not that we don't appreciate what you did," put in Neville, with a glance at Hermione. "We think it'll be really helpful."

"Yes, obviously," agreed Hermione. "I wasn't suggesting otherwise. I was just commenting on the other thing."

"You're just unhappy that Harry doesn't show his work in Transfiguration," Neville teased her.

"Well, that too," she admitted. "It's just annoying that I have to know every last detail of how a spell works before I can get it to work, and he can just make them up."

"I wonder if Voldemort can do that..." mused Harry. To the others' surprised expressions, he added, "Well, remember that part of the prophecy, about my being his equal. What if this doesn't have to do with the energy of love, exactly, but just works better with it? What if he has some ability to come up with spells out of the clear blue sky, and I just got this from him?"

"If that's true, I'd say you're using the skill a lot better than him," joked Ginny.

"It's an interesting idea," said Hermione thoughtfully.

"There's no way to know, of course, but it makes as much sense as anything else. Maybe you should ask Snape, see if he knows of any unusual ability of Voldemort's. How's he doing, by the way?"

"Pretty well, I just talked to him this morning. There's really not so much to talk about anymore, about his condition, since the discomfort was gone a few days ago. Now, I try to think of things to talk to him about before I go. He can tell I'm doing it, and he's made fun of me for it a couple of times, but not in a mean way, and I don't care anyway. I think he's happy for the company, even if he'd pretend otherwise. I asked him how he felt about the executions, partly out of curiosity, and partly to see how he'd react."

"Like, would he be bloodthirsty, that kind of thing," said Hermione. "I assume he knew that you were doing that, too."

"He always has been pretty observant, so yes. The first thing he said was that they should die by the slowest and most painful method possible. I said that if he didn't want to tell

me, he should say so. Then, he smiled—just a tiny one, and quickly, but I'm pretty sure he did. I think it was a, 'at least you're not so stupid that you figured out I was kidding' kind of thing."

Neville spoke as Harry was pausing. "Well, it's nice that you're so pleased that his insults aren't quite as scathing as they used to be."

Harry was surprised not so much at what Neville said, but at the way he said it. Usually when Neville made a comment intended to be humorous, it was said innocently, or with deliberate understatement. Here, Harry felt, there was an edge to Neville's tone, almost hostility. Not even conscious that he was doing so, Harry sighed. He almost started to explain why he was happy, then he realized that this had come up before, and that Neville simply wasn't all right with Harry being happy for Snape. I shouldn't bother trying to convince him of anything, thought Harry, I just have to let him get used to it. "Well, he's doing better, anyway," he said to Hermione as casually as possible, aborting the rest of the story he'd planned to tell. Hoping to avoid an awkward silence, he changed the subject. "I also saw Archibald while I was there. He said that with the executions today, the Ministry was practically shut down; lots of people were put on various kinds of guard duty, and even those that weren't, weren't concentrating much on their work. And, of course, some people are on winter holiday anyway."

Harry stopped talking as the fireplace lit up, and Ron walked out. "I would ask 'how'd it go,' but that doesn't seem very..." He shrugged, at a loss for a word.

Ron nodded. "I know what you mean."

"What?" asked Hermione. "Where were you?"

"They're doing them every ten minutes," Ron explained to Hermione somberly. "Malfoy's was at three-ten. I watched his."

Her eyes went very wide, as did Neville's. Harry and Ginny didn't react, as Ron had told them while practicing Quidditch the day before. "Why?" asked Hermione in disbelief. "It wasn't..."

"No, it wasn't Schaden-whatever," said Ron, seemingly annoyed that she would have thought it, but trying not to show it. "I felt like... like I owed it to Pansy, to see it happen with my own eyes, so I could be sure. They're checking everyone, as an extra precaution, with a spell to detect anyone who's used Polyjuice Potion. So, I'm as sure as I can be that it was really him. He's gone, I can tell Pansy that he is, and that's one less thing for her to worry about. Not that she was so worried, while she's here and with us, but you know what I mean. Just the idea."

Harry definitely knew, and thought it was very good of Ron to have done it. "What was it like?" asked Hermione, concerned for Ron.

"Not exactly fun," said Ron. "There's this strange feeling, when you're sitting there, and you know they're going to kill someone. Like it's not quite real. There were seats there for people who wanted to witness it, about fifty. Kingsley said that people were standing in line. Some were relatives of the people they killed. I talked to Kingsley yesterday, and he made sure I got a seat for Malfoy."

"Funny thing is, they didn't Silence them. I'd have thought they would have, but I guess they figured if they're going to kill people, they'll at least let them say whatever they want to say before they die. The condemned people are held in

place, but they can move their heads. Malfoy looked out and saw me, and started on this rant, on all this stuff he was going to do to Pansy and I once they got him out. It was amazing, it was like he really believed Death Eaters were going to come bust him out of there at the last second. I think they give the person a minute or so to say whatever they're going to say. So, Malfoy's going on and on, I was wondering when they were going to decide he'd had enough time. He gets to this part where he says Pansy's going to like what he'll do to her. Then he says, 'I bet she never told you this, Weasley, but the day I left Hogwarts, the day I cut her up, she-' It was obvious what he was going to say-

"Sick bastard," muttered Ginny disgustedly, obviously angry on Ron's behalf, for his having to be reminded.

"Tell me about it," agreed Ron. "But just then, they give the signal to the person doing the Killing Curse, in the next room, shielded so no one can see them. Malfoy sees he's not going to get to say what he was going to say, and gets frantic. He yelled, 'Not yet, not y-'... then the Curse hit him, and he dropped dead. Someone came in and checked him, to confirm it, and they levitated the body out of there."

There was silence for a few seconds, then Ginny said grimly, "No matter how awful a story is, it's always good when it has a happy ending."

Harry fought back an urge to glance at her reproachfully. Malfoy had tortured her too, Harry remembered well. He looked down, and she glanced over at him. "No comment about that?" she asked, in a tone that seemed both a challenge and an admission that she shouldn't have said it.

He shook his head. "Just because Schadenfreude is a bad idea in principle doesn't mean that it isn't sometimes..."

extremely understandable. You're more than entitled, any of us would be. I can't say I'm not glad he's gone."

"When's the last one?" asked Neville.

"Four-thirty," said Ron. "They started at eight."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I didn't know they had that many. That's... every ten minutes..."

"Forty-six," said Ron. "An hour break at lunch. They also did the Muggles who attacked Hogsmeade."

Hermione was astonished. "They didn't just give them back to the Muggle authorities?"

"I think the idea was, they killed wizards," said Ron.

"Yes, but the reason for us killing them isn't valid, like it is with the Death Eaters," argued Hermione. "They would have just been sent back to Muggle prison, they were no particular threat. We killed the Death Eaters because they might have escaped and killed more wizards, but that wasn't the case with the Muggles."

Ron shrugged, tilting his head to one side. "That's true. I'd bet anything it was done because the relatives of the Hogsmeade dead wanted it. We only caught one of the Death Eaters actually responsible, and those people did fire the weapons."

Very unhappy, Hermione looked at Harry. "This is the slippery slope, Harry. It's a textbook example, it's exactly what Albus used to say. You do the first thing, and that makes it easier to do the second..."

"I know," he said. "I'll talk to Bright. Not that it'll do any good now, since this is done, but maybe I can... I don't know, get him to think about it, to make sure this doesn't go any further."

"Yes, he's a politician, so I'm sure he can be persuaded to do the right thing," said Neville; Harry imagined that Neville meant for the sarcasm to be less obvious than it was. Hermione looked at him sharply, and Ron and Ginny had mild looks of surprise.

Is this about the Snape thing, or is he just in a mood, Harry wondered. Trying to keep any emotion out of his voice, he said, "Stranger things have happened." He then turned to Ron and Ginny. "How about some practice?"

Ron nodded. "I was going to suggest it when I got home, actually." They all Summoned their brooms as they turned and walked to the door. As Harry walked out the door, without turning, he sent to Hermione: Please don't ask me about Snape anymore when Neville's around.

Two hours later, Bright's secretary gestured Harry into Bright's office. Foregoing the handshake, Bright gestured Harry to a chair. "You should be honored, Harry," said Bright wearily and, Harry assumed, mocking the pomposity of his office. "I've had a long day, and there aren't many people I'd see right now. But I know what you're here to say. I do deserve it, though I thought you might give me a day." Bright sank into the chair next to Harry. He really looks tired, Harry thought.

"Were you the one who went over them with Legilimens?" he asked.

Bright didn't react, though Harry sensed he was surprised. "That wasn't the first thing I thought was going to come out

of your mouth. Yes, it was me. I did all of them, including the Muggles, two days ago."

"And this was just before it was suggested to you that the Muggles be executed too," guessed Harry.

Now Bright did raise an eyebrow. "For someone who supposedly doesn't think much, you can be pretty quick."

"On the other hand, I never stopped to think that you might have had a hard day," Harry admitted.

Bright nodded; every gesture he made reminded Harry that Bright was emotionally tired or physically tired, probably both. "You heard about the Muggles, got on your horse, and came over. Again, not that I blame you. I didn't listen to my conscience, so I get to listen to you. It seems fair."

Harry was surprised that Bright would put it that way. "If you can ignore your conscience, you could certainly ignore me."

Bright chuckled humorlessly. "My conscience hasn't performed numerous acts of extraordinary bravery. That's probably why I don't listen to it." Turning serious, he said, "This isn't intended as a defense, or an excuse... but two days ago, I spent hours going over the minds of people who've committed the most depraved, horrible acts. I saw Malfoy doing what he did to Pansy, torturing Ginny... I saw Lestranger, she and the others torturing Neville's parents, killing Sirius Black and taunting you about it... I saw the same or, if you can believe it, worse, in the memories of every Death Eater. And the Muggles were no saints either, believe me. All taken from high-security prisons, all had killed before, many multiple times. Whoever took them clearly had checked them with Legilimency to make sure they would kill without remorse or hesitation.

"I know that doesn't make our killing them right. But at the end of the day I'd spent doing that, I received a highly emotional appeal from the relatives of the Hogsmeade dead. I should have put them off, told them I'd sleep on it. But I knew without a doubt that the world would be better off without them, that is, the Muggles who attacked Hogsmeade. So, I said yes. Again, the politics of it were obvious, but this time, I would like you to believe that political expediency had nothing to do with my decision."

Harry decided not to apologize for the fact that he was checking Bright. "I sense that you'd like to believe it, too."

Again, a mirthless chuckle. "Yes, that is a problem in a situation where there are two reasons to do something, and one is political expediency: it's hard to be sure that the politics had nothing to do with it. But, still... the timing was amazing, they caught me at just the right time for their argument to be most effective. Once I made the commitment, that was that, I couldn't go back on it. I know what you're going to say, and it's all true. It's just... I shouldn't smile, the whole situation's so grim, but sometimes you just can't help it. I was just recalling that I told you last week that I was very good at separating my personal feelings from my political actions. It seems ironic that on one of the rare occasions that I let my feelings decide for me, it's in the direction of doing the morally questionable thing, rather than the morally right thing. That just seems like a real indication that I'm not cut out for 'doing the right thing.'" Bright paused, then added with a shrug, "So, that's it. I don't know what more I can tell you."

Harry felt his frustration with Bright dissipating. "Albus always told me to try to look at things from the other person's point of view. Doing that here... you say your conscience hasn't performed acts of bravery, but I'm not so

sure. I assume it was what made you decide to do the Legilimency yourself. That's pretty brave, as far as I'm concerned."

"Thank you, Harry," said Bright earnestly. "That means a lot, coming from you. Of course, it's something I didn't truly appreciate until I actually did it. Reading about something in the paper, or a report, is one thing; seeing it in someone's memory is really another. I mean, honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if I had nightmares. And it makes me wonder about human nature, that people can be like that.

Madeline... she's been occasionally frustrated with me that I would do such a thing, and mostly, doing anything she can to help, to be supportive. And even though you came here to give me a hard time about what I did, it's good to be able to talk to you about it, too. You're one of the few people I can tell, since it involves my Legilimency. While what I saw was impressive in its sickening volume, you've actually been in situations like this, as well as seen them. You know what this is about."

Harry nodded grimly. "You just get through it as best you can, and have the emotional breakdowns later. At least in my case, I've always had my friends to help get me through it. Funny, how Voldemort has no idea of that at all, that I have this enormous source of strength that he can't begin to imagine, even though it's very simple, in a way. No wonder love burns away at him."

"Indeed... well, to be honest, I really wouldn't mind getting home. It's been a long day, and I haven't gotten nearly enough sleep over the past two nights, a fact of which I've been reminded by at least a dozen people today. But I did sort of derail you from why you came here, so if there's anything you want to say that you haven't, go ahead."

Harry shook his head. "Just that... Hermione said this was a perfect example of the slippery slope, but I assume you know that."

"I do. I hadn't thought of it quite that way, but she's absolutely right."

"Well, it'll make her feel better to know this isn't a deliberate policy, anyway. It's interesting, I can't tell the other five the reason you did it, because it involves your Legilimency--"

"You can tell them," said Bright evenly.

Harry was amazed, as he knew how important it was to Bright that the information not get out. "Are you sure?"

"Harry... pretty much everything important that happened with Malfoy and Lestrage that involves you and the others, I saw. Better than before, I know what they've been through, what they've done. Really, it's all right. If I can know something like what Lestrage did to Neville, they can know this."

That made sense to Harry. "I'll make sure they know not to tell anyone. If there's one thing I know, it's that they can keep a secret."

Bright stood. "I know. And Harry, how's Neville doing? Did he get back from what happened last summer all right?"

Harry suddenly wondered if that had anything to do with how Neville was currently being about the Snape situation. "Yes, thanks. He had a hard summer, but he's okay now."

"Good," said Bright. Harry thanked him for his time, and left.

Two days later, the first day of the new year, Harry flew through the air on his broom on a cold, clear, winter day. He caught the Quaffle passed to him by Ron, then tucked it into his stomach to foil Charlie's attempted steal. Taking his Firebolt to full acceleration, he shot ahead towards the hoops. Approaching the far left hoop, he heard Ginny's voice in his head. "Eight," she said, as he entered the scoring area. Harry faked a shot on the left hoop, then in the same motion, not turning to look, he threw the Quaffle behind him and to his right. He flew down into a 180-degree turn, righting himself as soon as he got out of the scoring area. He looked up just in time to see Ginny throw the Quaffle through the right hoop.

"All right, let's take a break," shouted Charlie, and they all set down. Charlie regarded Harry, Ginny, and Ron with a mix of admiration and suspicion. "As a practice, what's going on here is fine. As a competitive match, it's a farce. Harry, I really want to know how you're doing that. You've made a dozen blind passes to Ginny, and every one has been exactly on target, or very close. Did you put some spell on yourself to give yourself eyes in the back of your head?"

"No, but that's not a bad idea. Hermione, maybe you could research that." Hermione and Neville had, to Harry's surprise, joined Pansy to watch. "This is all Ron's idea. You know, of course, that the hard part of one Chaser bearing down to score and then passing off to another is that you have to turn and look to see who's where, and who's open. With the Firebolts, we can be pretty sure that we'll be open. As for location... Ron's divided the playing area into nine sections, or lanes; three left, three center, and three right. Ginny flies about five seconds behind me, in a specific lane, and tells me on her hand which lane she's in. If I have an easy shot, I'll take it; if not, I'll pass off to her, without having to slow down or turn to look. As Bill's noticed, the

Keeper has to respond to my fake, and by the time he's finished reacting, Ginny's in the scoring area, and has a clear shot. We've been working on this all week."

Fred and George exchanged a grin. "Using the Joining of Hands to advantage in Quidditch," said George, clearly impressed. "I like it."

"Very devious," agreed Fred. "We're very proud of you, Ron, for having thought of it." Ron rolled his eyes, but Harry could tell he was pleased.

"Is it legal?" wondered Bill.

"I checked the rules," said Ron. "There's nothing that says you can't do this."

"Amazing," chuckled Charlie. "I really am impressed, Ron. It makes me want to visit Hogwarts on the day of the first match and watch. It should be something to see. I don't think they could stop you even if they knew what you were going to do. They're just going to be spectators, their Chasers, anyway."

"And what makes it worse is that their Keeper graduated last year, so they'll have a new one," said Ginny sympathetically. "I feel sorry for him, or her. First match... it won't even be funny."

"Believe me, I know what that's like," said Ron. "But that's the way it is in sports."

"Good attitude, Ron," said George approvingly. "No mercy. Heaven knows we never had any. And Harry, that was some nifty passing, for a beginner. Why only you to her, though, not her to you?"

Ron answered. "It's because Harry has the stronger passing arm. Ginny's also a slightly better shot, but Harry's getting better. It could go either way, I just picked this way, to focus on for practice. Besides working on the passing, the main problem has been the timing; Harry has to get out of the scoring area before Ginny enters it. But I think they've got that down okay, now."

Charlie shook his head in wonder. "I definitely have to see this. Fred, George, can you think of any ways to stop them?"

"You mean, that don't involve mayhem?" asked Fred.

"Ideally," replied Charlie.

Fred and George exchanged a look, then shook their heads as one. "There's just nothing we can do," concluded Fred. "Even double-teaming wouldn't help, since they can just fly faster. What we should do now is let the three of them practice defense. The brooms will allow for more chances for stealing the Quaffle, not to mention intercepting passes. The Gryffindor Keeper won't be experienced either, so Ravenclaw's only hope will be to score often enough to keep it close enough to allow time for their Seeker to get the Snitch. So, let's see how you do."

They practiced defense for a half hour, after which Charlie predicted that that Gryffindor would take at least twice as many shots on goal as Ravenclaw. As they headed back to the house, Harry and Ginny's arms around each other, Harry thought about how strange it would be to practice as a Seeker for the next month, knowing he wouldn't be playing the position.

The end of another vacation, thought Harry, as he carried his trunk downstairs. It went by too fast, especially when things went well, which they had after a rocky beginning. He

thought about how, this year, he would often think in terms of things being the last time, during his student years at Hogwarts. His last ride in to Hogwarts on the Hogwarts Express, his last Halloween feast, his last Christmas vacation... and soon, his last Quidditch match. Okay, he thought, not until June, but it's still too soon.

He sat at one end of the sofa, next to Ron. Ron looked up in mild surprise, and asked, "What are you going to do if Ginny comes down?" referring to the fact that Ginny wouldn't be able to sit next to him.

Remembering what had happened before they left for Hogwarts at the beginning of the year, Harry casually said, "Oh, she can sit on my lap."

Hermione and Pansy laughed. Ron looked around nervously- Harry assumed it was mostly for Pansy and Hermione's amusement-then moved over to the other end of the sofa. Laughing again, Pansy said to Harry, "She might sit on your lap anyway, of course." She then got up, walked to the sofa, and sat in Ron's lap.

Now Harry and Hermione laughed, as Ron tried not to look discomfited. "Well, now that it's my lap that's getting sat on, it seems all right to me."

"Amazing what a change of perspective can do," said a smiling Pansy, who then leaned in and kissed Ron.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a smile as Ginny came down the stairs and into the living room. "Everything's as usual down here, I see," she said, grinning. "Ron, you're so shameless."

Harry and Hermione laughed again. Ron broke off from the kiss to say, "I'm not going to dignify that with a mmf-" Pansy

kissed him again, cutting off his response.

"Apparently not," said Hermione, amused. She looked at Harry, and Harry got an impression of Neville upstairs, wanting to talk to him. Included in the impression was the idea that he had told her on his hand.

Harry wondered why she hadn't said it verbally, then guessed that it was something Neville didn't want people asking about. He kissed Ginny, got up, and went upstairs. Neville was in the boys' bedroom, sitting on his bed, packed trunk next to him. Harry sat on Ron's bed, opposite Neville. "I was just thinking, after I asked Hermione to have you come up here, that if for some strange reason I needed to get a message to Ginny without the pendants, I could... through four intermediaries."

"True," said Harry. "It could get garbled in the phoenix translation, though."

"You and Hermione seem to do okay with that," observed Neville. Harry nodded, but said nothing, wondering where Neville was going with this. "It's interesting, she's told me that there can be difficulties when you're trying to get across standard human ideas, communicate facts... but when the subject is feelings, there's never any doubt, and some things can be communicated that would be very hard to do with words. I admit, sometimes I envy you that. Don't worry, that isn't what I wanted to talk to you about, I'm just thinking out loud. It doesn't bother me like it does Ginny."

"I assume she's talked to you about it," guessed Harry.

"Of course, I was the first one she did. Then after that thing the day you found out about Blaise, we had a long talk about it." Harry understood that Neville would be the natural person for Ginny to talk to about her feelings, since he was

in the exact same position that she was. "I think I helped her a bit, she said I did, anyway."

"I'm glad," said Harry sincerely.

"I know. You didn't ask for this, and it would be ridiculous to ask you not to use it. If you can help each other with it, then you should. And thinking about that reminds me... she told me what you sent her the other day."

"I didn't mean for it to be insulting," said Harry, unable to tell from Neville's manner whether he was offended.

"She told me that," said Neville. "She spent a few minutes trying to describe your mood; she said that you were mainly frustrated. That you could understand why I'd have a problem with it, but that you felt I was taking it out on you for something that wasn't your fault. Also, that I was raining on your parade a bit; here you'd done something incredible, difficult, and stressful, it came out well, but you couldn't enjoy it if I was around."

"She could tell all that from what I sent her?" asked Harry, surprised. "I hadn't even thought about my mood in that much detail."

"She can tell your mood from anything you send her. Didn't you know that?" Harry shook his head. "You should mention it to her, I think she thinks you can do the same with her. She says your mood is in the background, at least, of everything you send, the phoenixes send it along."

"Anyway... the reason I asked her to send you up is that I wanted to apologize for how I've been with you recently. You don't deserve it; you did deserve a vacation as relaxing as possible, especially after that teachers' meeting, and the business with the executions. Instead, you have to listen to

me being snotty with you. I'm sorry about that. I... obviously still have lots of issues with Snape, but I'll try not to put them onto you."

"I appreciate it, Neville. I know this isn't easy, it was hard for me to get past this kind of thing when I started changing how I dealt with him. But, you know, the irony is-and I'm not trying to defend him-that in a way, the person you have issues with doesn't exist anymore. The only connection he has with that is that the whole person chose to be Cleansed, and so much has happened since then, he's a very different person than he was before he was Cleansed."

"I know that, in a way... but in a way, it doesn't make a difference. I don't think this is something you can just decide like that. He harassed me so badly all that time, I don't think I can change the way I think about him until I see it for myself, and that doesn't seem likely, since I'm not taking his class. I'll just graduate, become an Auror, and never have to deal with him again."

"There might be Hogwarts staff social events," pointed out Harry. "Your wife will be his co-worker, there'll still be some contact."

Neville smiled. "I just realized, I think that's the first time anyone's ever used the words 'your wife' when talking to me. I like the sound of it. But I suppose you're right, I hadn't thought of that. Oh, well, it was a nice thought while it lasted."

Harry almost said, 'Give him a chance, he might not be so bad now.' At the last second he changed his mind, realizing that Neville had to deal with the situation in his own way, and the best thing Harry could do was stay out of it. He just nodded. "So, ready to head back to school?"

"I guess so," said Neville, tapping his trunk to lighten it, then picking it up as he stood. "It'll be nice to have the joining to be able to use, for talking from bed. I'm always too self-conscious to use the pendants for that, because of the volume you have to talk at. Do you still talk to Ginny before you go to sleep?"

"For at least ten minutes or so, it depends on how much we've talked during the day. It's very nice, but we're still really looking forward to being able to sleep in the same bed."

"So are we. I feel kind of bad for you, you have to wait a year longer."

"Ginny jokes about dropping out as soon as she reaches seventeen," said Harry, as they started down the stairs. He knew she wouldn't, of course, but the idea definitely sounded good.

The next day, Harry was back at Hogwarts, which was the same as ever. The main difference was that Quidditch practice could start in earnest, and the Slytherin second years wasted no time getting out to the pitch in the afternoon, Harry was told later by Ron. Harry knew that Ron was itching to get out to the pitch, but the Gryffindor tryouts wouldn't be held until Wednesday afternoon.

In the staff room after lunch, Harry kept a close eye on Snape to see if he would behave any differently; to his disappointment, Snape was as quiet as usual. The only difference was that the anger was gone from Snape's eyes, and Harry doubted the teachers would notice that. Snape rewarded one of Harry's glances with a sardonic expression, silently needling Harry for hoping for or expecting what he did. Harry gave Snape a tiny shrug in response, and tried

not to look at him again. Soon afterwards, as Hermione walked with him to Charms, she said, "I'd guess that he's specifically trying not to let a difference be seen; it'll be a big enough difference that he's not being totally nasty with people most of the time. I think he wants to avoid questions about why his character suddenly changed. If it's more gradual, people won't wonder so much." Harry could understand that, but he still wished Snape would be his natural self, whatever that was at the moment. Then Harry thought, I guess his natural self doesn't want this to be noticed.

After his sixth-year Defense Against the Dark Arts class finished at four-fifty, a Hufflepuff girl named Cindy Barton approached him as the other students left. "Professor, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," said Harry. "Let's go into my office." He looked up and saw Ginny leaving the classroom, looking at her hand. In a second, he heard Ginny in his head, telling him that she'd be in Gryffindor Tower.

He closed the door behind them and took his seat, gesturing Cindy to hers. "Was Ginny just talking to you?" she asked.

Surprised, Harry nodded. "How did you know?"

"You nodded a little as you walked in here. I felt a little bad for asking, because I know you usually go to the couples' places with her after this class," she said with a shy smile. "It's just hard to find another time to talk to you."

"No, now is fine," he assured her, slightly surprised to find himself not embarrassed at her mention of the couples' places, and by that time, not especially surprised to find that many people knew that. "We weren't going to go today

anyway, since we just had all vacation to be alone if we wanted to. So, what can I do for you?"

Her expression dampened as she focused on the reason she was there. "It's about my mother. Well, my parents, but especially my mother. They went to that meeting at the beginning of vacation; they hadn't known you were teaching combat flying. They told me they don't want me joining the ones who go out to fight if the castle is attacked."

"That's fine, obviously," he said. "I said at the meeting that I didn't think everyone would. If anyone doesn't want to, they shouldn't."

"Well, I want to," she clarified, unhappily. "My mother just doesn't want me to, and she says she can tell me not to, since I'm not seventeen. She also doesn't want me even taking part in the flying part of the lessons," she continued, now indignant. "She wants me to just tell you I'm not joining that part of the lesson, and if you have a problem with it, you could talk to her. My Dad doesn't agree, he thinks it can't hurt for me to be trained in that. My Mum is afraid that if I know how, then I'll go and do it anyway, even though she told me not to."

"Will you?" he asked, ready to check her answer.

She answered honestly. "I don't know. I'm tempted, I'd really like to. I think most of the sixth years intend to go, some, even though their parents told them not to. But I'm their only child, and I know that anyone who goes could get killed. So, I'm afraid of what that would do to them, if that happened."

"You really shouldn't go, then," he urged her.

"But my birthday's in April!" she protested. "I'm so close to seventeen, it's stupid that I can't make my own decision because of a few months. I'm not going to feel any differently then."

Remembering something Dumbledore had once said, Harry repeated it as best he could. "If we don't agree with a law, then we shouldn't follow it, if we're ready to accept the consequences. But if we agree that a law makes sense, then we should follow it, even if we don't like it right then. There's a good reason why children aren't allowed to make decisions like this. They just had to pick an age, and seventeen is the one they picked. Do you think the first years should be allowed to go out and fight?"

"Of course not, but this is different... okay, I see your point," she reluctantly admitted. "If the age is sixteen, then fifteen-year-olds would say, why not us, and it would keep going down. I really don't like it, though."

"I know," he said sympathetically. "But you're right, we do have to think about the effect it has on the people we love. I mean, Ginny suffers a lot every time I get involved in something, and a few times it's been by my own choice—"

"But she signed that scroll," said Cindy. "I did, most of us did. She knew what she was getting into."

"Yes, she did. But that doesn't make it easier when it happens. There have been times when I haven't thought about that as much as I should. Obviously you've thought about it a bit, which is good. I guess I would say, really try to put yourself in their position. Imagine what the rest of their life will be like if something happened to you."

"But your parents fought Voldemort, they were killed, and that affected you a lot. I read that article..." Harry tried not

to roll his eyes, but she could obviously read his expression. "... and I know you said it wasn't right, but I know it wasn't that wrong, either. I've heard things. But even if your childhood was good, you know what I'm trying to say."

"I know, and you're right. It took a lot away from my life." He looked at her intently. "Cindy, this is the hardest thing about this kind of situation, deciding whether to fight or not. I fight, and a lot of my friends do, but I've seen a lot of death. I know what can happen, and I wouldn't blame anyone who didn't want to fight, or didn't want their children to."

"But if nobody fought, then Voldemort would win," she pointed out.

"Yes, he would. That's why it's such a hard decision. Professor Dumbledore once told me that the... collective intent of a community, I think is what he said, is what ends up deciding situations like this. Each person's decision adds up, and the more people decide to fight, the better off we are. But each person's decision to fight is a terrible risk. Professor Dentus decided to fight, and lost his wife, who he should have had many more years with. Who am I to tell someone they should risk that? People have to make that kind of decision for themselves." He chuckled inwardly, thinking that Dumbledore would be pleased that he'd said that. "Or, they have to make it for their children, if their children aren't seventeen."

"But you've said, we have to fight. That was the whole point of your getting people to say Voldemort's name."

"That's a good point," he admitted. "I guess it's that I was saying, the community has to fight him. I felt okay about saying that, because it was obviously true, but I somehow

feel differently about telling any specific person, you should fight. I don't think I've ever done that."

Harry could see the concern in her eyes. "Maybe because if you did and they got killed, you'd feel responsible."

He nodded slightly; he had never thought of it that way before, but it sounded right. He doubted that was the only reason, however. As he was opening his mouth to answer, his pendant vibrated. He reacted with surprise; Snape hadn't used that to call him since their sessions had ended. "Professor?"

"I would like Messrs. Weasley and Longbottom, and yourself, to meet me in the Potions classroom, as soon as possible," said Snape. Cindy's eyes went wide at hearing Snape's voice.

"I'm kind of in the middle of something, Professor."

Harry could almost hear Snape stifle a sigh. "And how long do you and Miss Weasley plan to be?"

Cindy giggled, then covered her mouth in embarrassment. "If you must know, Professor, I'm in my office, talking to a student in my capacity as a teacher. But don't feel bad, that's what she thought I'd be doing too," he added dryly.

"I see," said an obviously discomfited Snape. "At... at your earliest convenience, then." The line went dead.

Eyebrows high, Cindy pointed at the pendant and mouthed something. "It's okay, he can't hear us anymore," he assured her.

"He was embarrassed!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe it! A few of the fourth years were saying in the common room

that he seemed different, like, not nasty, like he usually is. That's so strange!"

Harry nodded, and hoped not to be asked a direct question about it. "So, getting back to what we were talking about... are you going to stop coming to that part of the classes?"

"No," she said. "Who knows, maybe my mother will change her mind. Or, maybe the attack will happen after my birthday. Anyway, I want to learn this."

Harry wasn't about to tell her she had to leave a class if she didn't want to. "Okay, good. I really should go, though."

She nodded. "That's okay, I think I said everything I wanted anyway." As they stood, she said, "You said we could do this anytime. It isn't for class, though, but just because I want to." She stepped closer and hugged him. "Thanks for... everything you said."

"No problem," he said. As she left his office, he wondered what in the world Snape could want.

"What do you think he wants?" asked Ron ten minutes later, as the three of them approached the Potions dungeon.

With a glance at Neville, Harry responded, "Like I told Neville when he accused me of making the worst joke of my life, I don't know."

Neville grunted. "Now I just wish it *had* been the worst joke of your life."

They entered the dungeon; Snape emerged from his office at the other end of the room. "Please sit down," he said politely, and they did; he took a seat facing the three of them. "It is my understanding that you, Mr. Longbottom and

Mr. Weasley, wish to become Aurors. I am sure you are aware that one cannot do so without a Potions N.E.W.T., or the equivalent. My purpose in asking you here is to offer you private tutoring, with the goal of your learning enough to achieve a N.E.W.T. by the end of the school year."

Harry wasn't sure which of the three of them looked most surprised, but then guessed it had to be Neville. Ron was the first to speak, managing to ask, "Why?"

"I have recently recognized that my previous classes did not offer an ideal environment for learning," said Snape evenly; Harry struggled not to giggle at the absurd understatement. "I believe you both would do better in such an arrangement as I offer, provided that you applied yourselves. For most students, missing out on the opportunity of a Potions N.E.W.T. is not crucial, but for you, it may be."

Harry was stunned; this was, by Snape's standards, an apology for how he had conducted his classes in the past. He was also impressed that Snape would take on the extra work, but then he supposed that now that Snape was no longer a spy, he had to do something to keep occupied. Neither Ron nor Neville responded, so Harry asked a question. "Could you really get them ready, in such a short time?"

"I suggest two lessons per week, of three hours each. In the six months remaining, that would amount to the equivalent of nearly eighteen months of normal classroom lessons, which I believe should be adequate. I emphasize, do not accept this offer if you do not plan to put in the required out-of-class work; I do not propose this to waste my time."

Harry chuckled at his own expense. "This wouldn't be such a bad idea for me, actually."

"Yes, that is the reason you are here," said Snape, with an amused glance at Harry. "Your performance in the regular Potions class is... adequate, but there are definitely areas in which you could use a refresher. I would be happy to inform you when those areas are coming up."

Harry couldn't help but grin. "Well, if it'll make you happy..."

With a long-suffering air, Snape replied, "It is just an expression, which you know perfectly well."

"An expression you wouldn't have used before," countered Harry.

Snape sighed, then turned his attention to Ron and Neville. "The lessons would be on Wednesday nights at six-thirty, and Sunday afternoons at three o'clock. I would expect, Mr. Weasley, that you would schedule Quidditch practices around those times. Do either of you have any questions?"

Neville's tone was, for him, almost hostile. "In what way exactly would the 'environment for learning' be better?"

Harry saw Snape swallow his irritation. "I cannot believe you do not have enough information from him," gesturing to Harry, "to know the answer to that question. However... there will be no hostility, attempts at intimidation, harassment, or derogatory comments."

Harry was impressed that Snape would say that much, but Neville clearly wasn't. "You just made a derogatory comment to Harry a minute ago."

"He does not take offense," Snape pointed out. "As a fellow professor and Head of House, I allow him to take certain liberties. I believe that Professor Potter and I... understand each other quite well."

"We should, after all that time together," mused Harry. "So, what do you guys think?"

Still looking surprised, Ron said simply, "I'm in."

Harry tried not to look at Neville; there was a silence. Finally Snape said, "If you would like to take some time to think it over, you may, until Wednesday evening."

Neville shook his head. With what appeared to be great difficulty, he said, "No, that's okay. I'll do it."

Harry silently applauded; he knew that hadn't been easy for Neville. "Very well," said Snape. "One other thing... if you know of any other seventh-year students who strongly wish to become Aurors, or join some other profession which requires a strong grounding in Potions, but did not achieve the sufficient result to join the N.E.W.T. Potions class, you may inform them of this. If they are interested, I will interview them to determine their suitability." Translated, thought Harry, that meant: I'll use Legilimens on them, and they'll only get to join if they're serious about it. Harry couldn't fault him for that, though, since Snape was giving up his free time to do it. "In the meantime, I suggest that you promptly send away to Flourish and Blotts for the proper textbook."

"Okay, thanks," said Ron, in a far friendlier way than he would have ever spoken to Snape before; Harry wondered whether Ron was trying to set an example for Neville. Ron then glanced around, as if wondering whether they were done.

"You guys go ahead, I'll meet you at dinner," said Harry. After Ron and Neville had left, Harry turned to Snape. "What made you decide to do that?"

"I had an attack of conscience," replied Snape, deadpan.

"Uh-huh," said Harry, his tone making it clear that he knew Snape wasn't serious. "Does this mean you'll be changing your standards in the future?"

"I would prefer not to; I feel that the inclusion of weaker students only slows down the stronger ones. However, I should recognize that not every student is like Professor Granger is, or like I was, and not everyone knows by the beginning of their fifth year what career they wish to pursue. I will probably keep the 'Outstanding' standard, but make individual exceptions as I choose, based on interviews.

"Professor," continued Snape, now slightly uncomfortable, "I should not have—"

"Don't worry about it," interrupted Harry, not wanting Snape to feel that he should apologize, though he wasn't sure whether Snape actually would have or not. "I wasn't bothered, and Ginny and I are pretty regular about Mondays at five, so I could see why you'd think that. Actually, we wrapped that up pretty quickly; I was later than I would have been because just when I was leaving the office, someone else came to see me: Ellen Turpin."

Snape nodded. "I assume she wished to apologize for her father's behavior." To Harry's impressed look, Snape added, "I overheard a conversation relating to it earlier. She was apparently mortified by her father's actions."

"Yes, that was basically it," agreed Harry. "She told me that she had to beg, scream, threaten, and so on just to be allowed back here, that he wanted to pull her out. She wanted me to know that she didn't blame me for what happened to Lisa, even though he did." After a short silence,

looking at Snape's expression, Harry said, "I assume you don't have a whole lot of sympathy for his position."

"Are you asking because you wish to know if my feelings on this sort of matter have changed?"

"No, it was just a comment. I assume they haven't. I mean, your problems have been so huge that anyone else's are going to look small by comparison."

"I had not considered it in quite that way," said Snape. "I was more recalling what the headmaster used to say. If everyone were like Turpin, we would lose. Each loss you have suffered has only intensified your desire to fight."

"Well, yes, but as Albus also used to say, and still does—"

"'People must make such decisions for themselves, and we should not judge them,' I know; I heard it even more than you. His patience, or stubbornness, was remarkable; he knew I could never accept that point of view, but continued to espouse it to me anyway. I still do not accept it; I still feel that it is perfectly reasonable that we judge the actions of others. If we take his attitude, we absolve others of responsibility for their actions, and we all suffer as a result."

"But he never said that people weren't responsible for their actions," said Harry.

"Not judging them almost amounts to the same thing," argued Snape. "Turpin's attitude may be understandable, but it is destructive to the community, and should be judged accordingly."

"But if Albus had judged you, for example, he never would have helped you the way he did."

Snape nodded thoughtfully. "It may be more accurate to say that if he had been the type of person to judge me, he would not have been the type of person who could have helped me as he did. You are quite right; I suppose it is an irony of the situation. However, the knowledge does not persuade me of the rightness of his position."

"It's funny," said Harry, "I want to be like him, but in more than one way, I can't quite manage it. Cindy's parents-she was the one who just came to see me-don't want her defending the castle, and I was telling her I didn't blame them. That was true, but I think I implied that I didn't judge them... but that's a lie, I think I do judge them, even if I might not want to admit it. I want her defending the castle, I want anyone who would be useful defending the castle. Everyone who doesn't fight increases the danger for those of us who do."

"It will not surprise you," said Snape seriously, "to know that I feel that what you say is exactly right. That has been your attitude from the beginning, when you started your campaign to say his name; you simply did not state it exactly like that. You did say, in the Prophet, 'there's nothing else to do but fight him.' A logical extrapolation is that it means everyone shares that responsibility. If Miss Barton's parents do not want her joining such a battle, perhaps they should consider joining it themselves."

"I hadn't thought of that," mused Harry. "Well, I should go, it's almost time for dinner." He stood, and a thought occurred to him; he decided to air it, even though it seemed likely to annoy Snape. "Professor... this isn't part of some... testing of you, I'm just curious... did you do this partly to make it up to Neville?"

The corner of Snape's mouth curled up a bit in amusement. "No, I did not. I am not sure how I feel about the notion of personal debts; it seems quaint, in a way. What Mr. Longbottom suffered from my actions was partly due to his particular weakness of character, and partly him involuntarily sharing a tiny part of my burden, as you did. I almost could not but act as I did, given my situation, and some of those around me shared my burden, the headmaster most of all. I see it as an inevitable aspect of the situation, and something I need not apologize for, or make up for.

"I suppose one could say, however, that a small part of my motivation was the notion that Mr. Longbottom deserved an opportunity to... perhaps the phrase 'confront his demons' is too strong, but something along those lines. I respect his bravery, as well as that of all the others—to whom, needless to say, you are not to repeat a word of this. It is ironic; he still quails at the sight of me, despite having faced far more formidable adversaries. I remind him of what he used to be; I evoke his feelings of powerlessness and fear. It is not I that he fears, but what I used to be; he knows this, but cannot simply accept it. It is an adjustment for him, such as we each had to make when you replaced the headmaster in assisting me in July. This will give him the opportunity to make this adjustment."

Harry nodded, glad that Neville would get the chance. "Well, thanks for answering the question. See you later." Now, I wouldn't mind spending some time alone with Ginny, he thought as he headed off for dinner.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 20, Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw: As the Voldemort situation seems to calm down, something

happens that makes Harry angrier than he's been for quite some time.

From Chapter 20: Harry was flabbergasted; he just couldn't believe Corner would say such a thing. "Have you read about the Joining of Hands?" he challenged Corner angrily. "Do you even know what it is? You must not, if you would say something like that!"

20. Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw

The next five weeks were unexceptional, both at Hogwarts and in the wizarding world in general. At the same time, it was highly exceptional in one respect: there were no Death Eater attacks at all, and had been none since the executions. Triumphant sounds started coming from the Ministry anonymously, as if the executions had solved everything. Most people felt that this was just the calm before the storm, or Voldemort regrouping, gathering forces once again. Snape speculated that the injury Harry inflicted on Voldemort had motivated him to be far more cautious than before, both in his own activities and those of the Death Eaters.

A long period of unusually bad weather in January prevented most Quidditch practice. Harry suggested that students be allowed to practice flying in Rings of Reduction created especially for the purpose, but as Pansy had predicted, McGonagall vetoed the idea on the grounds that there could be no supervision. When there was a rare pleasant day, teams scrambled for the pitch. To Ron's great annoyance, three of the pleasant days in January were Wednesdays.

"I can't believe it's come to this," complained Ron on the Friday before the second Saturday of February. It was evening in the Gryffindor common room; Harry and his friends were on the floor, books spread out in front of them. "Tomorrow is the first Quidditch match, and we've only practiced five times. Five times!"

"You know what I can't believe?" said Ginny in mock outrage, mimicking Ron's tone. "That's five times you've said that this week. Five times!"

"I have not."

"No," she conceded, "but it sounded good. It's three times at least, though."

"Why do you care so much, Ron?" wondered Neville, keeping his voice down. "You practiced a lot over vacation, and the practicing you would've done wouldn't have been that relevant anyway."

Before Ron could answer, Hermione did. "It's the same reason that I'd be complaining if I could only go to the library five times in a month, even if I didn't need to that badly. It's just the idea. I think for Ron, the practicing isn't only a means to an end, it's partly the end itself."

"Never thought about it that way, really," said Ron indifferently. "I'm just glad the weather was so good when we were at the Burrow."

"Actually, the weather ends up favoring us, doesn't it?" Harry asked, looking up from his Potions text. "I mean, Neville's right, the practice wouldn't have helped that much, but the other teams'll need it. Especially Corner, if he's only had the chance to practice five times since he took over as Ravenclaw's Keeper, he's going to be in trouble."

"Seven times," corrected Ron.

Harry did a double take. "You know exactly how many times Ravenclaw practiced?"

"I asked Colin to keep track."

"First of all... why? And secondly, Colin watches the other teams practice too?"

"Just curious," said Ron, a little defensively. "And yes, he does. He practices his announcing, sees how the teams fly, he says it's like research. He promised the other teams he won't tell us about anything he sees, like helping us out on strategy."

"But he's at liberty to tell you how many times the other teams practiced," noted an amused Hermione. "And they trust him not to tell you about strategy? With a sister and a brother on the team?"

"Colin has an honest face," joked Ginny.

"Thank you, Ginny," shouted Colin, sitting halfway across the common room.

"And incredibly good hearing," she said more loudly, obviously intending to be overheard.

"Not really," he replied loudly. "It's just that thing where you hear your name, even if it's very faint, and you start listening."

"Yes, I have that too," she said. "But with Harry, it's the opposite. He hears his name, and he sticks his fingers in his ears and starts humming."

The common room exploded in laughter. As it started to die down, Neville said, "Oh, Ginny, that was very good."

"It's funny because it's true," added Ron, grinning and watching Harry for reactions.

"Um... we were talking about Quidditch, right?" asked Harry innocently.

"Yes, and you were making fun of me for being obsessive," pointed out Ron. "See what it got you."

"You're right. I'll never make fun of you again," said Harry solemnly, drawing a laugh from the others.

Ron made a put-on expression of concentration. "Well, you know, my keen sense of Legilimency is telling me that you're totally lying."

"Well, Albus told me that you're not supposed to use it for—" He stopped speaking as his pendant blinked pink. "What is it, Pansy?"

"Could you meet me in the classroom?" she asked, using the shorthand phrase for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom they had recently adopted.

"Sure, I'll be right there," he said, then shrugged as he stood.

"It must be something to do with the second years," suggested Hermione.

"Maybe they're nervous about the match tomorrow," offered Ron. "They want the advice of a grizzled veteran."

"Well, I am having to shave more and more often, but I wouldn't say I'm 'grizzled,'" joked Harry. "See you later."

A few minutes later, he walked into the classroom to see Pansy and Hedrick sitting in seats, next to each other. "Hello, Hedrick. Are you worried about the match tomorrow?"

"No, should I be?" asked a suddenly anxious Hedrick.

Harry smiled, then Pansy did. "No, but Ron was saying that maybe you had last-minute questions about Quidditch."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "I love him, Harry, but he really does go on about Quidditch. If we end up together, I'm going to have to become a fan, or I'll go crazy."

"It may get better once he's not captain of the team anymore. So, what's up?"

Pansy and Hedrick both become serious. "Hedrick had me test him," Pansy explained. "He's still at 99."

"Hedrick, I told you before, you have to be patient--"

"You try being patient when you're at 99 for over a month," interrupted Hedrick. "Sorry," he added with an embarrassed glance.

"Well, I see what you mean about the whole not-being-patient thing," joked Harry. "Seriously, I can see why you're frustrated. But it'll happen eventually--"

"Harry," said Pansy, giving him a significant look, "I... told him, told them, that you're a Legilimens. I told them what you did for Ron."

Harry's eyebrows went high as he pieced together the situation. "You want me to do with you what I did with Ron?" Looking grim, Hedrick nodded. Harry looked back at Pansy, amazed. "Pansy, I don't know where to start. I mean, he's only twelve--"

"I'm going to be thirteen next month--"

"It doesn't matter whether you're twelve or thirteen--"

"Harry," said Pansy loudly, trying to get them both to stop talking. "I wondered if this might happen, and I checked a month ago. There's no law that says you can't do Legilimens on a minor."

"Really?" asked a startled Harry.

She nodded. "If it was for bad purposes, it would be covered under the general law, that adults can't do harmful spells on minors. Now, of course, there's the law that adults can't do any spells on minors who aren't their children without their parents' consent, but you're a Hogwarts professor, and more importantly, his teacher. You can do it without his parents' consent if it's 'necessary as a learning activity.' I think you don't have to stretch it at all to say that this is that kind of a situation."

Harry felt very uncomfortable. Dumbledore had warned him that Legilimency was not a very well understood skill, and people were usually disturbed at the thought of it being done to them. The last thing he wanted was a parent complaining that Harry had done Legilimency on their child. "Hedrick, how do you think your parents would feel if I did this?"

"They wouldn't care!" insisted Hedrick.

"You mean, you have no idea whether they would care or not," corrected Harry. To Hedrick's surprised look, he tapped the side of his forehead. To Pansy, he said humorously, "You did explain everything that Legilimency does, right?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes. I spent a while on it, gave him all the warnings. Could be extremely embarrassing, you could see anything, bad memories, all that. He's a lot like Ron was,

Harry. He doesn't care. I didn't just call you as soon as this came up, you know. I've been all through this with him, with them. The others say that if they were at 99 for a month, they'd want to do it, too."

Harry could understand that. He had to remind himself that he'd never had to go through that, having it be a goal he was trying to reach; it had come to him unbidden. To do justice to Hedrick's feelings, he had to try to put himself in Hedrick's position.

"Professor," said a very determined-looking Hedrick, "Okay, I don't know how my parents would feel. But I talked to them during winter vacation. They're proud that I'm this close, and proud of how you feel about me. I really do think that if they find out and aren't happy about it, it'll be at me, not at you. I'm the one that asked."

"Hedrick, I'm not hesitating because I'm afraid that your parents will be mad at me. It's because parents should be able to know—"

"Harry," Pansy interrupted him firmly. "You're worrying too much. This isn't going to hurt Hedrick. It might embarrass him, but there are some decisions that a twelve-year-old should be able to make for himself. I think this is one of them. Don't think so much, just help him. It was important to Ron, it's important to him."

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry, Hedrick. I wasn't comfortable doing this with Ron, and he was seventeen. Maybe I'm just using your age as an excuse." He turned to Pansy. "Would you keep an eye on the doors, deal with anyone who comes by? Not that I think they will, but just in case..." She nodded.

He turned to Hedrick. "Okay, just clear your mind, try not to think about anything at all. You'll see memories come up,

just let them go by, and relax. I'm just going to call up some good memories at first, to sort of warm up. Okay?"

Hedrick nodded, clearly nervous but trying not to let it show. "Okay."

Harry cast Legilimens, and called up memories of love. They involved Hedrick's parents, two people who were obviously grandparents, Harry, Pansy, and Helen. Harry raised his eyebrows slightly at the fact that it was Helen and not the others in the group, but didn't linger on the thought. He then called up feelings of friendship, and got more scenes involving the other second years, but with an emphasis on Helen.

I have a feeling I know where this is going, Harry thought. His experience with Ron would now come in handy; unlike then when he groped around blindly, he now had ideas about what to look for. He dismissed the idea of looking for feelings of violence, since Hedrick hadn't had the same experiences that Ron had. Embarrassment connected to love seemed like a much better bet, and he knew he had to explore Hedrick's feelings for Helen. He felt bad for Hedrick that he had to look, but he knew he had to.

"Okay, now I'm going to look at specific things," he told Hedrick, feeling like a doctor who tried to explain to the patient exactly what he was doing to make him more comfortable. "I'm sorry, but I have to look at—"

"I know," said Hedrick, his expression reminding Harry of how he had felt as a child, naked in a doctor's office. "It's all right."

"Did I ever mention that you're very brave?"

Despite his nervousness, Hedrick smiled. "Yes, once. But thanks."

Harry cast Legilimens again, and called up memories connected to Hedrick's feelings for Helen. One of them was when he had hugged her in the room they were in now; a few were from energy-of-love sessions, where he had focused on her in summoning feelings of love. It was very clear to Harry that Hedrick loved her. He put down his wand, reached out, and took Hedrick's hand for a few seconds, trying to communicate his feelings without words. Then he said, "I need to think for a minute."

Hedrick and Pansy were silent. Harry wondered how Hedrick could be in love at the age of twelve. Almost thirteen, he imagined Hedrick correcting him. He knew Helen was already thirteen, with a January birthday. Can people be in love at that age? he asked himself. Then he remembered that his feelings for Cho had begun at the age of thirteen, even if he was too mortified to act on them for the next two years. Maybe Hedrick's different, he thought, maybe everyone's different. Maybe focusing on love made him fall in love sooner than he would normally have. The thought crossed Harry's mind that most people would refer to Hedrick's feelings as a 'crush,' because of his age. Harry wasn't inclined to think that, because he had seen them for himself, felt how Hedrick felt. Hedrick felt a very powerful attraction to Helen, wanted to be around her, thought of her when he thought of love. Whatever a crush is, Harry thought, this didn't feel like it. But does it have anything to do with him staying at 99? He decided to look in the area that had caused Ron difficulty, feelings of embarrassment connected to love.

After a minute of searching, he stopped again. "I think this may be it," he said to Hedrick. "I think it'll be helpful to tell

Pansy; as far as the situation itself, she might be more helpful than me. But if you don't want me to, I'd completely understand."

"You can tell her," said Hedrick. "But not the others, just you two."

"Of course," agreed Harry. To Pansy, he explained, "He's in love with Helen."

Pansy broke into a smile. "I thought that might be the case. I've seen how you looked at her, a couple of times. But what's the problem?"

"He hasn't told her, of course. He's... understandably nervous about the idea, and the anxiety that it causes is interfering with his ability to focus on love. If he only thinks about non-romantic love, like his family and his friends, it's okay. But she's the one he thinks of most when he thinks about love, and it always brings up that discomfort. I have to think this is what's causing him to stop at 99."

"I can really understand that," she said, looking at Hedrick sympathetically. "But there's no problem like Ron had?"

"No, there's no embarrassment about the energy of love, or love in general. Just about her."

"Not embarrassment," clarified an embarrassed Hedrick.

"No, sorry," agreed Harry. "Worry, anxiety."

"So, what should I do?"

Harry looked at Pansy for help; she looked no more sure than him. "This is the hard part, Hedrick," he admitted. "The obvious idea is that you tell her, then you'd know one way or

the other, and you wouldn't have to worry about it. But obviously, it's risky; it could be very hurtful if you don't get the response you're hoping for. We're starting to get into issues more important than whether or not you can use the energy of love. I guess you don't have any idea whether she feels the same way."

Surprised, Hedrick shook his head. "Didn't you look for that when you were in there?"

"I only saw what you saw," he assured Hedrick, "and I didn't look at anything I didn't think I had to."

"Oh. No, I don't know, but I'd be amazed if she did. I know we're really young, I just... I can't help how I feel. I didn't know that this would be the problem, and now that I know it is, I still don't know what to do. I'm really scared of telling her."

Harry's heart went out to Hedrick, and he could see that Pansy's did, too. "If you don't tell her, then honestly, I don't know what you could do to change the situation. Love is really powerful, it can't be ignored. I know, I've tried," he added with a self-deprecating smile. "Strictly from an energy-of-love standpoint, telling her is the thing to do. If you don't get the answer you want, it would be really hard, but then at least you'd know, and you'd have to work out what to do from there. But of course, there are other things to consider than the energy of love. I can tell you that even if she didn't feel the same way as you, she still loves you as a friend, and would be nice about it, would try hard not to hurt you."

"But even if she doesn't want to hurt me, if she doesn't feel the same way, it'll hurt a lot," said Hedrick quietly. "I know that much."

"Yes, it will," agreed Harry. "That's why I don't want to say that you should do any particular thing. You know what the choices are; you have to be the one to decide what risks to take, what you can live with." This theme keeps coming up, thought Harry as he watched Hedrick agonize over what to do. First with Archibald over whether I would fight the executions, then when talking to Cindy about whether or not to fight Voldemort. Then he remembered what Dumbledore had said after he had returned from the Chamber of Secrets, that 'our choices define who we are.'

Just then, Hedrick looked at Harry. With a mix of queasiness and determination, he said, "Send a dog for Helen."

Harry almost asked if he was sure, but then realized that he shouldn't try to dissuade Hedrick, or give him doubts. Before he could summon the dog, however, Pansy said, "Wait a minute, it's five to nine, and they have to be back by nine." Hedrick gave her an accusatory glance. "I'm sorry, Hedrick, but I am Head Girl, I have to think about things like that."

Harry tapped his pendant. "Black," he said, and waited.

"Yes?" came Snape's voice; Hedrick gave a start.

"Professor, I'd like your permission for Hedrick and Helen to be out of Slytherin for a while after nine o'clock."

He could imagine the look on Snape's face. "For what purpose?" came the reply.

Hoping Snape would accept it, he said, "It's a class-related activity. It's important."

There was a short pause. Finally, Snape asked, "Where will they be?"

Thank goodness, thought Harry, he's going to allow it. "In the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom."

"They must be in their dormitories by eleven, and they must be supervised."

"I understand, Professor, thank you." He broke the connection, then conjured the dog, which went trotting off. Hedrick looked amazed, which didn't surprise Harry.

"Hedrick, I'd rather you didn't go repeating that to people. I know everyone's speculating on why he changed. I do know why, and all I can say is that it's personal. If I were him, I wouldn't want everyone speculating about it."

"Maybe he's speculating about why you asked that," suggested Hedrick. "Thank you for not mentioning it." Harry wondered whether Hedrick would notice the connection, that both he and Snape had something they didn't want people wondering about.

"One of us has to stay," Harry said to Pansy, "but obviously we shouldn't be in the room with them. Maybe whoever stays should stay in the office, while the two of them are in the classroom. We shouldn't be able to hear them, if they keep their voices down. That should satisfy Professor Snape's idea of supervision."

"Maybe I should be the one to stay," suggested Pansy. She looked like she was thinking of saying something else, but stopped herself. Harry thought he understood: if things didn't go well, the one who remained might be asked to be involved in the conversation, and Harry wasn't sure he felt up to that.

"Sure," agreed Harry. "I'll have to wait until she gets here, of course, then I'll go back to Gryffindor Tower."

They waited a few more minutes, then Helen entered the room, looking at Harry expectantly. "Professor? Is everything okay? Did it work?" She looked at Hedrick, who was clearly even more nervous, now that she was there.

"I've done what I can," he said, standing to leave. "But it's not just a matter of knowing what it is, but also doing something about it. There's something he needs to talk to you about."

She looked at Hedrick with concern. "I'll do anything I can to help, of course," she said earnestly, obviously thinking that he needed the help of someone who had already reached 100. "But you're not staying to help?"

He shook his head. "Like I've said, I've done all I can; at this point, it's better if I'm not here." Giving Hedrick's shoulder a squeeze, he left the room. I sure hope this works out, he thought.

As Harry finished his breakfast the next morning, he looked down the table to see how his teammates were doing. Dennis and Andrea seemed fine, but Eric and Lydia looked nervous, especially Eric. Harry could understand why a second year would be intimidated at playing for the first time in front of people. He made eye contact with Ron, then glanced in Eric's direction. Ron nodded, walked over, and sat down next to him.

"This is really going to be interesting," said Ginny, sitting next to him. "So, still nobody knows that I have my Firebolt?"

"I don't think so, no," he answered, looking around occasionally to see if the Aurors had arrived. "Nobody's said anything, and people are used to your using a Firebolt in practice, they think it's Ron's."

"Probably they didn't notice anyway," she said, smiling.
"After all, we only practiced five times."

"Seems like more than that, somehow," he chuckled. "Ah, there they are."

Neville had already stood to greet Winston, Tonks, and Cassandra; Harry assumed that, as with his and Ginny's trip to the Golden Dragon, they had gone out of their way to volunteer for this duty, especially Winston. He walked over to greet them, happy to see them even though he saw them once a week anyway, for their energy-of-love sessions.

Helen came over to hug her father. "My little girl, in her first Quidditch match," he said teasingly.

"How are you doing?" asked Harry. "Are you nervous?"

"No, I'm not," she said. Giving him a significant look, she added, "Hedrick was nervous last night, but he's fine now."

Harry smiled, understanding her message. "That's good, I'm glad. I hope you do well."

"It's hard to say, so soon, but I think it looks hopeful," she said, pleased that he was happy.

"Oh, I think it's more than hopeful, you'll definitely beat them," said Winston confidently, unaware of the meaning of Harry and Helen's conversation. "You had all that flying practice, you'll do great."

Harry walked back to his seat; Ron took his at the same time, having returned from talking to Eric. "He'll be okay, it's just the usual nervousness," said Ron. "By the way, I've decided to have Madam Hooch read our lineup to the crowd. I was giving the rulebook a once-over in bed last night, and

there's something about having to announce when you make changes in your lineup. I don't think that applies to the first match of a season, but I want to do it anyway. I don't want Corner complaining that we're doing something underhanded when you and I don't take our usual positions."

"Good idea. He'll be fit to be tied when he sees we have three Firebolts." Harry remembered how Corner had complained about him having bought Ron the Firebolt last year.

"I'll be so sorry to see that," said Ron mockingly. Harry wondered if Ron's dislike of Corner was due to Corner's having dated Ginny two years prior, or from his comments about the Firebolt. "Okay, everyone, time to go. We're up first."

They headed out to the changing rooms; the weather was overcast and cold, but rain didn't appear to be a danger. After they had changed, Ron informed the rest of the team of the lineup changes; they were stunned, especially Dennis and Andrea, who would be playing positions they had barely practiced at. As they left the changing rooms and walked to the pitch, Dennis said, "Good thing you didn't tell us a week ago, I'd have been a nervous wreck. This way, I'll only be a nervous wreck for a few minutes, until the match starts."

"Relax, Dennis, it'll be fine," Ron assured a not at all reassured Dennis. "We'll score so much it won't matter if they do a bit. Just keep cool, you'll get better as you go. And keep in mind, you can't do any worse than I did in my first go as a Keeper."

"Somehow, that doesn't make me feel any better," said Dennis uneasily.

As Ron walked over to Madam Hooch, Harry looked up at the flags flying over the pitch; they indicated that there was very little wind. Good, he thought, the passing should be no problem. As they entered the pitch he looked up into the stands for Hermione, Neville, and Pansy, and found them in their usual place between the Gryffindor and Slytherin sections. He wondered if McGonagall was going to give some kind of speech, as Dumbledore had last year, but realized that she had nothing in particular to say. She had already said that Hogsmeade days would, this year, not be held on days of Quidditch matches, as it would be something Death Eaters could predict and prepare for.

Madam Hooch spoke into a magical microphone. "Good morning. A note before the first match begins: I have been advised by Gryffindor captain Ron Weasley of changes in Gryffindor's usual lineup; he wishes to be on record as having properly advised all present of the changes, so I will read them." She gave Ron a skeptical glance, as if her time was being wasted; Harry supposed Ron had had to push to convince her to read them. "The Gryffindor lineup is as follows: at Beater, Lydia Kepler and Eric Kepler. At Chaser, Ginny Weasley, Ron Weasley, and... Harry Potter," she read, not bothering to hide the astonishment in her tone. Harry could hear the crowd murmuring and see stunned expressions on the faces of the Ravenclaw players. Recovering, Madam Hooch continued, "At Keeper, Dennis Creevey. At Seeker, Andrea Creevey. Captains, shake hands."

Suspiciously, Corner offered his hand to Ron. "What are you lot up to?"

Ron couldn't keep a smile off his face as he shook Corner's hand. "You'll be finding out very soon."

Colin began his commentary. "Welcome to another year of Quidditch, and the big news is that Harry Potter and Ron Weasley have abandoned their usual positions to join Ginny Weasley at Chaser," he said breathlessly. "One assumes this is to make full use of their outstanding Firebolt brooms. This is an enormous surprise; no one knew they were planning to do this, and they practiced at their usual positions.

Whatever experience those two have at the Chaser position is something I don't know... and the action is underway. Potter zooms up and snatches the Quaffle, and immediately heads for the Ravenclaw goal. Corner barely has a chance to set up shop, and Potter shoots and scores!" shouted Colin excitedly as the crowd cheered. "Oh, my, that was amazing, he made the shot from twenty feet out, barely within the scoring area. In an audacious move, Potter is announcing that he'll take a shot from anywhere in the scoring area. Corner wasn't ready, as he wasn't expecting Potter to-intercepted! Ron tips, then catches, a pass he would never have gotten to if not for the Firebolt! He passes to Ginny, who races over to... wait, I believe she has a Firebolt too! Potter races alongside her, a foot away, outpacing the Ravenclaw defenders... yes, I think all three Gryffindor Chasers have Firebolts! Another surprise, and it explains further the lineup-Potter shoots again from the edge of the scoring area, and again it's in! Unbelievable! Twenty-zero Gryffindor!"

As he flew back to defend, Harry smiled, thanking Ron mentally for suggesting he practice that shot at the Burrow. It was a difficult shot, but Ron had explained that if he could make two early on, he could establish a game-long advantage over the Ravenclaw Keeper by making him go for fakes from further out than usual.

"Corner passes to Boot, who heads downfield, Ron all over him. Ooh, there comes a Bludger from Lydia, and both Ron

and Boot have to duck. Boot takes advantage of the distraction to break clear for a moment and pass to Stanton, who races toward the Gryffindor goal, Ginny covering. He approaches the scoring area, and-another steal! Potter races over, sticks an arm underneath, and pops the Quaffle loose, then grabs it! Gryffindor in possession!"

"Three," Harry heard in his head. He sped down the field, deciding to pass even if he had a clear shot.

"And Potter races down the right side of the field, Ron to his left, Ginny a few seconds behind. Yes, it's definite, all three have Firebolts, and they are leaving the Ravenclaw Chasers in the dust. Potter approaches the scoring area as Ron peels off to his right. Potter shoots, no, fakes, then passes-caught by Ginny as she enters the scoring area! Corner is hopelessly out of position responding to the fake, and Ginny takes the uncontested shot on left goal from three feet out! Oh, my, what a display! Part of the reason Corner was so totally fooled was that after the fake, Potter made a blind pass to Ginny! He didn't look, but she was right where he passed the Quaffle! Amazing!"

Harry chuckled to himself at how excited Colin was getting, but then he supposed it was very unusual, and the crowd had cheered mightily at the goal as well. He raced back toward the Gryffindor goal to help out on defense, where Ron was smothering Boot as best he could. Boot advanced, holding onto the Quaffle tightly, and entered the scoring area, Ron still with him.

"...Boot moves forward, Ron staying in front of him. Ron can get in Boot's way, but can't use his hands in the scoring area. Boot feints right, goes left, Ron briefly goes for the fake, then heads back, but Boot has a clear shot and he scores! Through the left hoop, and Dennis was very much

out of position; I think Ron's body obstructed Dennis's view of Boot, and he couldn't position himself properly.

"Thirty-ten Gryffindor, Dennis passes out to Ginny, who passes to Potter, leading him by a few feet with the pass; he speeds up and catches it. Oh, my, halfway down the field and they're already ahead of two of the three Ravenclaw Chasers, who are going to have a very hard time being a factor on defense. Potter heads in down the center, fakes a shot on the left goal as Corner goes for the fake, another blind pass to Ginny! She enters the scoring area as Potter leaves it, and shoots and scores! She put it into the left goal as Corner was scrambling to recover from the fake!

"I don't know how Potter is doing that blind passing, but clearly it's extremely effective. Normally once you're in the scoring area you have to take a shot, or turn and pass, by which time the Keeper has a chance to reposition himself. Potter's blind passing takes away that time, and an off-balance Keeper is simply no match for an approaching Firebolt—Corner hurls the Quaffle halfway down the pitch, intercepted by Ginny! That was a risky throw, and she takes it and heads to the Ravenclaw end. She approaches the scoring area, fakes a pass to Potter on her left and instead passes to Ron on her right, her pass leading him into the scoring area. Ron flies in at an angle, almost parallel to the goals, Corner staying with him, Ron stops! Corner flies a few feet too far, and Ron has an easy five-foot shot into the center hoop! Fifty-ten Gryffindor! That maneuver probably wouldn't work against an experienced Keeper, but Corner moved from Chaser to Keeper when he became captain, and due to the January rain wasn't able to practice as much as he surely would have preferred."

Ravenclaw missed their next shot on goal, then made the one after that, while Ginny scored two more goals, again

from blind passes from Harry, making the score seventy-twenty. Corner called for a timeout, and flew down to talk to Madam Hooch; Ron did as well when he saw Corner do it. Colin interrupted his commentary as the three flew over to where he was sitting, and hovered for a minute. Then they flew away, Ron shaking his head.

Colin resumed his commentary. "I have been requested by Ravenclaw captain Michael Corner, through Madam Hooch, to omit from my commentary any positional references; it seems that Corner believes that my commentary is aiding Potter in making his blind passes. I must say that I personally don't think that's the case, as my positional references are usually very general. However, I'll do as he asks, and try to omit words like 'behind, left, right, below,' and so forth." There was some chuckling throughout the crowd, as well as on the pitch. "I see Potter and Ron smiling, so I must assume that they think this will have no effect. The match resumes, Ravenclaw in possession. Boot to Stanton, who passes to an open Berenson, Berenson advances on the Gryffindor-another steal! Ginny punches the Quaffle out of Berenson's grip from behind, and Ron zooms over to catch it before a surprised Berenson can.

"Ginny, Ron, and Potter race down the field, already past the Ravenclaw Chasers, who were caught by surprise. Ginny passes ahead to Ron, then slows down, hmmm, maybe I shouldn't say that either. Ron to Potter, who enters the scoring area, fakes a blind pass and scores! He just blew right by Corner, who... well, I was going to say isn't having a good match, but that's not fair. Gryffindor has such a huge advantage due to their Firebolts that I doubt a highly experienced Keeper would do much better. Gryffindor has eight shots on goal and eight goals; they have clearly devised strategies to put their Firebolts to maximum advantage. The big surprise here is Potter, who we already

knew was an excellent flier, but turns out to be very good at shooting and passing as well."

Over the next five minutes, Gryffindor scored five more goals, three of them by Ginny off of blind passes from Harry. Harry smiled to himself as he heard Colin make two separate references to how effective the blind passing was continuing to be; it seemed to Harry that Colin was annoyed at Corner's request, as if Corner were suggesting that Colin was deliberately assisting Gryffindor.

"Gryffindor with the Quaffle, Ginny to Ron, Ron to Potter. Potter advances, into the scoring area, and puts on a burst of speed and scores! He just passed Corner, flying at an angle to the left, and put it through the left hoop after he was by Corner. Corner seems to not know which way to move, confronted by excellent Chasers on the fastest brooms money can buy, and almost no defensive help whatsoever.

"Boot takes it down the pitch, Ginny on him. He's into the scoring area, and shoots from twenty feet out! Dennis had no chance to block it, but it just missed, hitting the upper part of the hoop. A very nice shot there from Terry Boot, he almost had it. Dennis passes to Ginny, who passes off to Potter, who... ah, okay, I think we know how it's working. Potter down the pitch quickly, into the scoring area, blind pass to Ginny who comes in and puts it through the left hoop, and it's one hundred fifty to forty Gryffindor. As I was about to say, after Ginny passed to Potter, she looked at her hand. My guess is that that's how they're doing the blind passing: she tells him on her hand where she'll be, using their Joining of Hands. Very ingenious. Boot passes to Stanton... wait a minute, Corner calls for timeout again."

What now, thought Harry, deciding to join Ron in seeing what Corner had to say to Madam Hooch this time. "What is it, Mr. Corner?" she asked, as Terry joined them.

"I want to protest, and ask that Gryffindor forfeit the match," said Corner; Harry and Ron gaped at each other, wondering what Corner was talking about. "Potter and Ginny Weasley are signaling each other in an illegal way."

"It is not illegal," said Ron, a little more loudly than necessary. "Tell me where in the rules it says that."

"The rules say you can't communicate in any way other than speaking, or signals," argued Corner.

"No, they don't say that," retorted Ron. "They say that 'no device shall be used for the purpose of communicating.' The Joining of Hands is not a 'device.'"

"For the purposes of this match, it is," shot back Corner. "And you'd do a lot better in classes if you studied your textbooks as well as you apparently study the rulebook."

Harry was taken aback at Corner's attitude. "Hey, what's your problem?"

"If you want to make this personal, that's fine," said Ron belligerently. "But the Joining of Hands isn't a 'device,' it's more like an ability."

"Madam Hooch?" asked Corner, ignoring Ron.

She thought for a moment, then gave an answer. "The rules make no specific mention of the Joining of Hands; I assume that this would have been specifically outlawed if it was intended that it not be used for this purpose. I find that the

Joining of Hands is not a 'device.' Resume your positions, please."

Harry and Ron exchanged satisfied grins, but Corner didn't move. "In that case, I want to protest the match on the grounds that the rule against magical enhancement of the players has been broken."

"Oh, come on," said Ron disbelievingly, before Madam Hooch could respond. "You've got to be kidding. That's just to stop people from doing things like taking Polyjuice Potion before a match to get a better body. It doesn't apply to this."

"The rules don't say that it doesn't apply to this," said Corner. "They just say players can't be enhanced to improve their Quidditch performance."

"The rules say," replied Ron in growing disbelief, "that the enhancements that are illegal are 'those affecting speed, strength, agility, accuracy, or other enhancements specifically intended to be of advantage for Quidditch.' The Joining of Hands is obviously not in any of those categories."

"Yes, it is," said Corner. "The last one."

Astonished, Harry spoke. "Are you saying that Ginny and I had the Joining of Hands done specifically so we could use it for Quidditch?"

Corner glared back at Harry, but didn't respond. Madam Hooch prompted him. "Is that your contention, Mr. Corner?"

"Yes," Corner replied, not looking at Harry, Ron, or Ginny, who had just joined the group.

Harry was flabbergasted; he just couldn't believe Corner would say such a thing. "Have you read about the Joining of

Hands?" he challenged Corner angrily. "Do you even know what it is? You must not, if you would say something like that!"

"Mr. Corner," said Madam Hooch sternly, "I find that the Joining of Hands is not an enhancement designed to be of advantage for Quidditch, and I suggest that you not make any further challenges until you find a clear violation of the rules. Play will resume--"

"Just a moment, please," Harry interrupted her. He turned to Ginny. "Ginny, take over at Seeker, Andrea will take your Chaser spot. And don't look at your hand anymore."

Obviously knowing how he felt, perhaps feeling the same way herself, she said, "I understand." With a dirty look at Corner, she flew off toward Andrea to tell her.

"Um, Harry," whispered Ron. "I am the captain here."

Harry shoved back the impulse to say that he was Head of House, so he could do what he wanted; he was angry, but knew enough not to take it out on Ron. "Do you have a problem with what I just did?"

"No," responded Ron. "Just do it through me, okay? Don't worry, I understand what you're doing. He'll regret he said that." They flew back toward the center of the pitch, where Andrea met them. "You may not get a lot of shots, Andrea," said Ron, a little apologetically. "When you have a chance for one, feel free to take it."

"I heard what happened, Ron," said Andrea. "Not to mention he insulted Colin, too. Don't worry about me, I'll try to distract their Chasers. You two have fun."

Ron grinned, but Harry's face was still angry and determined. To Harry, Ron said, "Five-three-two-four-eight."

"Five-three-two-four-eight," Harry repeated. "Got it."

Madam Hooch announced the position changes. Colin finished his account for the crowd of the conversation that had just happened on the ground; there were scattered boos, especially from the Gryffindor section, when Colin explained Corner's second challenge. "Yes, it does seem a bit much," agreed Colin, noting the crowd's reaction. "The action starts again, Ravenclaw in possession. Boot to Stanton, Andrea on Stanton, reaches in for a steal attempt and doesn't get it. Potter joins to double-team Boot, who makes it into the scoring area but can't find a clear shot, flies down and out of it, passes off to Berenson. Berenson picked up by Ron, who punches it out! Another steal! Caught by Andrea, passes to Ron, up to Potter, who turns on the speed. Potter nears the scoring area, shoots-no, fakes!-blind pass to Ron, right on target, Ron slams it through the left hoop from five feet out! Oh, my, that was done just as well as it was with Ginny. Ron threw that Quaffle quite a bit harder than it needed to be thrown, and I don't think it's too hard to guess why."

Harry focused on the match as he never had before, concentrating on defense so hard that he made two more steals on the next five Ravenclaw possessions. The next four Gryffindor possessions resulted in goals from Ron in the same way as they had before, and in the one after that, instead of passing, Harry just took the shot himself, and scored.

"That's twenty-one goals for Gryffindor, and what's more impressive, it's twenty-one goals in twenty-one possessions. No Quaffles stolen, no missed shots. The score is two

hundred and ten to fifty, and now a Ravenclaw Snitch capture will not change the result of the match. If Ravenclaw is to stay in this, they have to start scoring some goals."

They did, but continued to do so at a far slower pace than Gryffindor. As the match continued, Harry wondered when Ginny or the Ravenclaw Seeker would find the Snitch, but neither did. Half an hour later, the score was Gryffindor five hundred and sixty, Ravenclaw one hundred and seventy. Harry felt as though he should be tiring, but wasn't; he continued to channel his anger into his play. He hadn't smiled for over a half hour; his expression was one of grim determination. Corner's, Harry couldn't help but notice, was one of ever-growing frustration; he had blocked only three of Gryffindor's fifty-nine shots on goal; two of Andrea's, and one of Ron's.

"And there's a goal for Andrea, her fifth of the match. As we near the forty-five minute mark, I should point out that while this has been a relatively long match by Hogwarts standards, many professional matches have lasted far longer, some as long as a few days. Dennis Creevey blocks a Stanton shot, he's having a fine match, especially considering his lack of Keeper experience, or practice. One has to wonder what Hogwarts would do if a match went on for that long; after all, students would have to attend classes on Monday, and get enough sleep. Another goal for Potter, taking the shot himself this time..."

At one hour and twelve minutes into the match, Ginny dove for the Snitch, and caught it. "And there it is, the end of the match," announced Colin. "The final score: Gryffindor nine hundred and seventy, Ravenclaw two hundred twenty." The Gryffindors flew down and met on their side of the pitch, near where they would be watching the next match. Harry

congratulated everyone with pats on the back, and a hug for Ginny.

"You tired?" she asked him humorously.

"Not really," he said. "You'd think I would be."

"Still mad?"

"Less than before, but I still think he's an incredible jerk," Harry responded, speaking quietly enough that only Ginny could hear him.

"I thought about letting you two score another few hundred points off of him," said Ginny, with a malicious glint in her eyes, "but I decided to put him out of his misery. I liked the idea that while you two were doing the damage, I was the one who was in control of how long he suffered."

"So you passed up a chance to catch the Snitch," he confirmed, still keeping his voice down.

She chuckled. "I passed up five chances." He blinked in surprise. "I am a fairly good Seeker, you know."

"I know," he assured her. "Especially since you had five chances and Lillian never even had one."

"She almost had two," she said, as Colin asked Ron to join him for the post-match interview. "I tried to keep an eye on her without being too obvious about it. Two of the times I saw the Snitch, she was in the same area, and might have seen it too. Those were the times I went into dives, so she'd follow me."

"You know, most of the time, what you did would make me want to say that it was unsportsmanlike. But in this case, it

makes me want to say I love you."

"I love you too," she smiled. "This stays between the six of us, of course. Anyone else asks about it, I'll lie."

"Fair enough," he agreed. They sat with their teammates on the sidelines as the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs walked onto the pitch with their brooms, and Colin started his interview.

"And the Star of the Match for the first match is Gryffindor captain Ron Weasley, whose... forty-four goals are, I think I can safely say, a new Hogwarts record. I could have picked Harry, with his twenty-three goals and remarkable passing, but, the main reason I picked you is that... I'd be willing to bet that the three of you being Chasers, and the element of surprise, was your idea. Would I be right?"

"Well, I'd like to be modest, Colin, but then I'd be lying," joked Ron. "Yes, that and having Ginny use the Joining of Hands to tell Harry her position, that was mine too. I think neither of them would have thought of using it for that."

"What do you think motivated Ravenclaw captain Michael Corner to protest that so strongly?"

Ron shrugged. "It wouldn't be fair of me to guess what he was thinking, and I'd rather not try. I will say that I don't think he thought for a second that Harry and Ginny had the Joining of Hands done so they could use it for Quidditch; that was clearly a tactic he used in hope of getting the match forfeited."

"Yes, but one could say that having Harry and Ginny use the Joining of Hands like that was a tactic as well, which made him decide to use his own tactic."

"That's true in a way," conceded Ron, "but what Harry and Ginny did wasn't directed at him personally, and you couldn't interpret it that way. What Corner said when he made that complaint was not only rude, but personally insulting of Harry and Ginny. You have to understand, they're proud of having had that done, of what it means, of their love and commitment to each other. To have someone say that it's just a Quidditch tactic... well, let's put it this way. I'm very competitive; I'll do anything I can to get an advantage. But I wouldn't say what he said, even if it wasn't about someone as obviously deserving of respect as Harry is." Ron's comment drew some scattered applause, mostly among Gryffindors, but also from the seven Slytherin second years on the field.

"So, I guess we could assume Harry was a bit upset about that," suggested Colin.

Ron laughed. "Yes, we could assume that. I mean, I was too, and so was Ginny, but Harry... well, I haven't seen him that mad for quite a while. But it obviously didn't affect his play; it made him even better, if anything. He didn't miss a single shot on goal, I think, and his passing was amazing."

"But the brooms helped, wouldn't you agree?"

"Oh, absolutely. Let's be clear, they helped a huge amount. I mean, I think we would have won without them, but they gave us a really big advantage, which I did my best to make even bigger."

"Is that really fair, though?" asked Colin. "I mean, if you win the Quidditch Cup, aren't people going to wonder whether it was just because you had three Firebolts?"

"Some probably will, but the fact is that the school's rule is that private brooms can be used. If the school wanted to

make sure all the brooms were equal, they could just change the rule. In the meantime, it would be stupid of us not to use the best brooms we have."

"As we saw, Ron, Harry's blind passing didn't suffer when it was you instead of Ginny. How did he know your position?"

"Every few minutes, we'd meet, and I'd give him a series of numbers, which told him where I was going to be the next few times," explained Ron. "He knew where to pass the Quaffle based on that. Having Ginny use the Joining of Hands to communicate that to Harry was a convenience, nothing more."

"So, why did he move Ginny to Seeker even though Madam Hooch disallowed Corner's complaint? And if I heard properly, that was him who did that, not you, is that right?"

"Yes, he did sort of forget for a minute that I'm the captain," said Ron humorously. "But I had no problem with what he did, I would have overruled him if I had. He was making a point, that using the Joining of Hands wasn't important to what we were doing. It wasn't the kind of decision made with the idea of what was best to win the match, but it was really understandable. Who knows, maybe Corner did what he did on purpose, tried to goad Harry into not using it even though it wasn't against the rules. If so, it worked, but it didn't do any good."

"So we saw," agreed Colin. "And lastly, Ron, were you and Harry also making a point by continuing to score so much? You certainly could have eased off when you got, say, three hundred points ahead."

Ron shook his head. "Colin, sports is about going out there and doing your best, all the time. In chess, if you're hopelessly behind, you can resign, but Quidditch doesn't

have that option. You play until the Snitch is caught, and as you pointed out, sometimes that takes a very long time. If we stopped doing our best, then we'd just be practicing, not playing Quidditch." Listening to Ron, Harry recalled with amusement that it had been Ron's original intention to have everyone resume their normal positions once Gryffindor got three hundred points ahead. Guess he forgot about that, thought Harry wryly.

"Thank you, Ron. The Star of the Match, Gryffindor captain Ron Weasley." The crowd applauded politely as Ron made his way over to where the rest of the team was sitting.

Harry leaned over and whispered to Ginny, "Do you think Ron knows?"

"I'm sure he at least suspects," she whispered back. "He won't mind, though, I'm sure of that."

Ron walked over and sat down, giving Harry a pat on the back. "Remind me never to tick you off, Harry."

"I don't think I need to remind you to never imply that my commitment to Ginny means nothing."

"No, I guess not," agreed Ron. "Well, at least there was a good outlet for your anger."

Sitting behind Ron, Harry, and Ginny, Lydia asked, "Do you think he really meant to imply that?"

"I don't know what he meant to imply," said Harry, "only what he did imply. I'm not sure I care what he meant. He shouldn't have said it unless he really thought it."

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and the second match got underway. Harry watched intently, very interested to see

how the Slytherin second years did. They flew well, he thought, but their lack of Quidditch experience showed, especially at the Keeper position. Hufflepuff had a potent offense last year, Harry recalled, and no changes at the Chaser position. Flying skill and superior brooms kept Slytherin in the match, but this one too went on for quite a while.

After forty-five minutes, with the score Hufflepuff two hundred ninety, Slytherin one hundred eighty, the Hufflepuff Seeker dove for the Snitch. Augustina followed her, and started to catch up, but it looked like she would be too late. At the last second, the Snitch darted up and away, and reacting quickly, Augustina flew upwards and grabbed it. Harry smiled and applauded; as was the case last year with Cho, it was with much more enthusiasm than the polite applause of his teammates.

After the interview, Harry and his teammates got up and started back to the changing rooms. "So, do you think Slytherin's going to be a threat?" Harry asked Ron.

"Not this year. With our Firebolts, we'll Banish them, but next year they'll be pretty strong."

"What do you mean, we'll 'Banish' them?" asked Dennis. Harry had been wondering the same thing.

"It's wizarding slang, I guess," said Ron, in a tone that suggested he'd never thought of it before. "It means, like, to get rid of, do away with. I meant that we'll beat them easily. Like the other teams, their only chance against us will be to get the Snitch quickly."

"Maybe you should leave Ginny at Seeker, then," said a familiar voice behind them. Harry, Ron, and Ginny turned in

surprise to see Oliver Wood smiling at them, Charlie Weasley at his side.

"Oliver!" exclaimed Harry, as Oliver extended a hand. "Wow, it's good to see you. And very surprising. Did you come here just to see the match?"

Oliver nodded as he shook Ron's hand. "We were on the team together my first two years on it. Charlie persuaded me to come, not that I needed that much persuading. He said that something interesting was up, but he wouldn't tell me what it was."

Harry introduced Oliver and Charlie to the rest of the team, then said to them, "Hope we didn't bore you."

They laughed. "It was long, but it was worth watching," said Charlie. "Fred and George came too, they were sitting with us."

"Don't they have the—" started Ron.

"—shop, yes, but the match started at eight-thirty, and they don't usually open until nine-thirty, so they figured they'd have plenty of time," said Charlie with a smile. Turning to Ginny, he added, "They're convinced that you deliberately put off catching the Snitch to torture Corner, for what he said today and for what happened two years ago. They were so proud. But they did say that they intended to send you the bill for the lost profits from them opening the shop a half hour late."

Harry and Ron laughed, as Ginny rolled her eyes. "They would. I don't even think about two years ago, believe me. What he did today would be more than enough to make me want to do that, if I had."

"Not quite a denial," said Charlie, with raised eyebrows.

"As much of one as you're going to get," she responded, a little smugly. "And they could always have left early anyway."

"No, they were having too much fun," said Oliver. "They wanted to yell stuff at Corner, but they were afraid McGonagall would have them thrown out if they did. They loved it when Harry and Ron started the blind passing up again after you moved from Chaser to Seeker. They were making jokes about how Harry must have had another joining done with Ron, on his other hand."

The whole team laughed, even Harry and Ron. "Now why didn't I think of that," chuckled Ron. "I am so devious, after all."

"I know you want to get to the changing rooms, it was a long morning for you," said Oliver, "but could you three wait for just a minute? There's something we want to ask you about." The four younger members went off to the changing rooms. Facing Harry, Ron, and Ginny, looking like he was about to make a sales pitch, Oliver said, "I was thinking about this before the match, but it seems like an even better idea now. You know I play for Puddlemere United, and you may know that I was just made the starting Keeper this season. I think my teammates would be interested, and I think it would be fun, to have a match that would basically be Puddlemere against the Weasleys. I'm imagining that Charlie would be the Seeker, Fred and George the Beaters, and maybe you three at Chaser, or Harry and Ginny at Chaser, Ron at Keeper, and someone else you choose at Chaser. If the three of you were Chasers, I could be the Keeper, and our reserve could keep for Puddlemere. What do you think?"

Ron's eyes lit up; Harry raised his eyebrows, but had no other reaction. "That sounds brilliant!" enthused Ron. "Wouldn't that be great, Harry?"

Harry was considerably less enthusiastic, but Ron's reaction told him that he had to be careful not to be negative about it. He did like the idea of the game itself, but was concerned about the 'Harry Potter' angle. "This would just be a friendly match, right?" he asked hopefully. "Not something in a stadium with ten thousand people?"

"See, having ten thousand people there would bother Harry," Ginny said. "Nine thousand, now, that would be okay. But not ten."

Ron smiled as Harry gave Ginny a 'that's not funny' look. "Sorry, it was just a joke," she said to Harry with wounded innocence. To Charlie and Oliver, she explained, "Harry hates being a spectacle. I have a feeling that the more people know about this, the less he's going to like it."

"I'd love to play the actual match," Harry emphasized, as much for Ron's sake as his own. "I mean, we'd get killed, but it'd be great to compete against pros."

"Wait a second," protested Ron. "Okay, we'd probably lose, but I don't think we'd get 'killed.' We aren't bad. I'd Keep, I wouldn't feel comfortable at Chaser against pros, so we'd have to find another Chaser, maybe Angelina. Let's put it this way, we'd do better than Ravenclaw just did against us."

"Which isn't saying much, but maybe you're right," Harry conceded. "Well, you can go ahead and talk to them about it, see what they think."

"Just don't use Harry's name much," said Ron, to Harry's gratitude. "Just mention me prominently, tell them they'd

get to practice against the legendary Gryffindor Keeper, Ron Weasley. They won't pass up the chance." Harry sighed as he realized he was being made fun of again.

"Let me ask you, Harry," said a serious Wood, "this spectacle thing, is it why you didn't go out for the Quidditch World Cup position? Because your name could be in the papers, that sort of thing?"

"My name is already in the papers, but I know what you mean." Deciding to tell Wood something to help Wood understand his sensitivity to the issue, Harry added, "Not exactly, but it's related. That guy, what was his name... Woodridge, he only wanted me on the team for the publicity, and he lied to me about it. Don't ask me how I know, I just know. He was going to put me on the team, no matter what. The reasons I told you then were true also, but I just don't want people treating me that way. If he's involved in this, I don't want any part of it."

"You're sure?" Wood asked, surprised. "Damn... he did seem excited, but I thought it was because I told him you were really good. Don't worry, I'll keep it low-key, just suggest it as a friendly match. I don't even know for sure that they'd want to, I just think they might."

Harry still couldn't help but wonder if his presence in the match would be what would attract the players' interest, but then he realized that this kind of thing was bound to happen all his life, and he had to try to be less sensitive about it. He had started checking Wood with Legilimens as soon as the subject had come up, but Wood had not lied about anything, to Harry's relief.

"Let us know, okay?" he asked Wood. "It sounds great." They chatted for a few more minutes, and Charlie and Wood

congratulated them again on the day's match. The three continued on to the changing rooms.

Harry wondered if Ron was upset at him for his lack of enthusiasm. "I'm sorry, Ron," he said. "It's just that--"

Ron waved off his apology. "It's okay. I realized when you mentioned Woodridge, maybe this is a smaller version of that. If they're interested, it'll probably be mostly because of you. I mean, I still want to do it, but if it gets to be a big thing, you can change your mind, if you wouldn't be comfortable."

"Thanks," said Harry. "But I hope that doesn't happen. It would be cool."

"Cooler than giving Corner what he deserved?" asked a smiling Ron. Harry smiled back, and didn't answer.

By the time Harry had showered and changed, it was time for lunch, which he and Neville ate with the Aurors. Due to the Quidditch match on Saturday and Neville's Potions commitment on Sunday afternoon, their weekly Auror training session was split into two half-days, Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning.

After he returned and had dinner, he had a Legilimency session with Hermione. They each practiced for a half hour; as part of her practice viewing memories, to Harry's surprise, she decided to call up Quidditch-related memories, including memories of that day's match.

She smiled at him after they finished. "You know that I don't care about Quidditch, but when I see your memories of it, it makes me want to take it up. You enjoy it so much, it seems really appealing when I see it through your eyes."

"Maybe a week before the N.E.W.T.s, I should view your memories of studying, and I would feel the same way you do," he joked

She laughed. "I don't think so, somehow. But today, you weren't enjoying it so much, after Corner's complaint. It seemed like more of a... grim satisfaction."

"Or, like Schadenfreude?"

"A little, yes, but not that I blame you at all, obviously. I had never thought of the idea of getting revenge through sports, but you did basically that."

"Is that why you chose those memories?" he asked.

She nodded. "I just wondered what it felt like for you. By the way, the phoenixes were kind of... disturbed, I guess. They both went off to their natural habitat, wherever that is, and tried not to focus on your feelings too much. I got some impressions from Flora while that was going on."

"Now I feel kind of bad. When I get like that, I don't think about how it affects Fawkes."

"He understands, Harry," she assured him. "He knows you're human, that you will get mad sometimes. It's just that, you know phoenixes have a low tolerance for this sort of thing. It's why they're so selective about who they choose, and why people as young as us aren't usually chosen. We'll probably both get mad a lot less when we're in our thirties and forties, which is when people are usually chosen."

Curious, he asked, "Do you try not to get mad, for Flora's sake?"

"Yes, I really do try," she said. "When I get really angry or sad, I try to control it if I can, and sometimes I ask for Flora's help. She sends me positive feelings, but she also understands that sometimes I just have to be mad, or sad. But at least she can help me not dwell on it any more than I have to. I really don't want her to be uncomfortable, and so I do what I can."

"I should do that. I just never thought of it," he said, now feeling bad that he hadn't.

"By the way, Mandy and Terry talked to me for a while in the library. Did you know that they're kind of a couple, by the way?" Harry shook his head. "Apparently, they started seeing each other over vacation. Anyway, they were talking about Michael. Terry, being on the team with him, had a chance to talk to him a little after the match, not that Michael was really in the mood to talk. He's been in a pretty bad way since the match."

"After what we just talked about," he said with a small, rueful smile, "I find myself trying not to have the feeling of satisfaction that I normally would be having."

"I can understand that," she said sympathetically. "Most of this is their speculation, because he hasn't talked much. They're both sure that he doesn't really think you had the joining done for that reason, it's just so absurd. They think it was partly a game tactic, like Ron said, but more because he was embarrassed."

"Embarrassed? What did he have to be embarrassed about? Because we were winning?"

"Not that exactly, but because he was being made to look bad. Maybe it's a little like how Ron felt during his first Quidditch match—"

"Yeah, well, nobody was chanting 'Corner Is Our King' today," Harry pointed out.

"I did say 'a little like,' I know it's not exactly the same. Nobody was trying to make him look bad. I just mean that Terry felt that Michael was embarrassed that you three were scoring off him so easily. He hadn't had that much practice at Keeper because of the weather, and then you three come up with this. Mandy thinks it was partly anger from embarrassment, and partly fear at the thought of what he knew would happen, which did happen, that it would just go on. His emotions just got carried away, and he reacted... a little like panic, I guess, where you just want it to stop as soon as possible, you don't care how. I really think that he did what he did not so much because he wanted to win, but just because he didn't want to go through the humiliation of being scored off of constantly."

"And then Ginny made him go through it anyway," mused Harry, still not feeling any sympathy for Corner.

Clearly noticing, Hermione added, "It's not like you weren't entitled to your feelings too, of course. What he said was extremely insulting, they know that. Terry said he kind of cringed when Michael said that. They just wanted me to know that they thought it wasn't... quite so personal as it sounded."

"Sounded pretty personal," grunted Harry, unconvinced. "Why did they tell you all this, anyway? Why not me?"

"Partly because you weren't around, but mainly because they were afraid you'd still be mad, and they wanted to let you know this, but they didn't want you to take it out on them. They didn't want you to think they were sticking up for Michael; they really weren't defending what he did. They

happened to be with me in the library anyway, so they just told me what they thought, and I could tell you if I wanted. I think they just hope you won't hold it against Michael for a long time, for something that happened in the emotion of the moment."

Harry sighed a little; he didn't want to even think about forgiving Corner, though he knew he should. "Well, if he wants to apologize, I'll listen," he said reluctantly. "But he really should apologize to both of us."

"He may not," she warned him. "Some people find that very difficult."

"Well, I won't be holding my breath," he said. "I don't really care if he does anyway, I never liked him that much personally. Not that he ever did anything to me, just... I don't know, his personality rubs me the wrong way."

"I do see what you mean," she agreed. "He's self-confident, a little too much at times; he can come off as belligerent."

"Like Malfoy, without the evil," Harry suggested.

"Or the prejudice, or other nasty bits, maybe. A little like that, just in that way only." At the end of Hermione's sentence, Harry's pendant blinked pink. Harry answered it; Pansy asked if she could see him. "Now is okay," said Hermione, knowing that Pansy could hear her over Harry's pendant. "We were almost done." Pansy signed off, and Hermione added, "You probably didn't care to hear about the Michael situation anyway."

"Not really," agreed Harry. "I'd just as soon be mad at him."

"Again, that's understandable, but... I hate to mention this, Harry, but I feel like I should. Remember fifth year, that thing

you said to Ron, about his Keeping... you were emotional, you said something insulting because of that. You can see how it could happen."

"I wish I could deny that you had a point, but you do," said Harry uncomfortably. "Funny how I'd just rather be angry."

"It's probably because you feel righteous. He was in the wrong, it's natural for you to feel that way, and unnatural to try to empathize with him. I'm not saying you should, but... it's just something to think about."

"It's what Albus would have done, for sure," he acknowledged. "Well, thanks, anyway."

She left, and he thought about it for a minute, until Pansy arrived. Sitting down, she said, "Wow, I just had this strong feeling of... nostalgia, I guess. The last time you and I sat in these chairs was... last March, almost a year ago."

"You were still under cover, trying to figure out how Malfoy was going to try to kill me... and now, he's dead. Things sure do change."

"For the better, definitely," said Pansy fervently. "It's strange, to think of how much time I used to spend with him. And unpleasant, so I think I won't," she added wryly. "I wanted to tell you about last night."

"With what happened today, I almost forgot about that," he admitted. "Helen sort of let me know this morning that everything was okay, though."

Pansy nodded. "I didn't know much of what happened last night; it was important that they have privacy, so I tried not to listen. I talked to her this afternoon, and she generally told me about it. She was very surprised; having him tell her

that was the last thing she expected. She was really flattered."

"But she doesn't feel that way about him?" Harry guessed.

"It's more like she hadn't thought about it. She considered him a close friend, but she hadn't thought of anyone romantically, really. Well, she did say that all five of the girls had crushes on you last year," she said with a smile, as Harry smiled in embarrassment. "Yeah, I thought you'd like that. It wouldn't have been hard to guess, though. Anyway, she just told him the truth, that she hadn't thought about it much. But I'll tell you, Harry, that if she hadn't thought about it much before, she sure has now. It's really powerful, to have someone feel that way about you, especially someone you already like. She was really affected, really touched. She couldn't necessarily say the same thing to him that he did to her, but she didn't throw up a stop sign, either. The way they left it was that they would consider each other 'special friends,' was the phrase she used. I think she just needs time to get used to the idea. But she is happy about it, I could really see that."

"I'm glad," said Harry, now smiling for a different reason than embarrassment. "I think that's about as much as anyone could have hoped for. It was a brave thing of him to do; she wasn't likely to just fall into his arms, like Ginny did with me."

"Well, what you did was brave anyway, because you didn't know for sure what she would say," said Pansy. "But that reminds me of something. You know that the second years heard a third-hand account of what happened with you and Ginny; I told them last year what Ron told me. But Helen and Sylvia saw it themselves, since you put the memory into the Ring of Reduction you did, and they told the others about it,

about all the memories you put in there. You know, Harry, they were so honored that you put memories of them in there, Helen and Sylvia both said they were crying when they saw them. Anyway, Helen asked Hedrick last night at one point how he got up the nerve to tell her, and he said that he remembered what they'd said about what you did with Ginny. Knowing that you just charged ahead in that situation made him decide to do it."

Harry shook his head in mild disbelief, pleased at the compliment but chagrined that someone would do something so risky just because he had. "Well, if that's the most reckless thing anyone ever does because of me, I'll be grateful."

"I still prefer 'brave' to 'reckless,'" she admonished him. "It was the best thing to do anyway, and I would have just straight out told him to do it if it wasn't for the risk, and I think you would have too. If you love someone, you need to tell them."

"I'm just happy it worked out as well as it did," he said. "So, do you want to stay and talk, for old times' sake?"

She laughed. "I could talk about my low self-image, cry on your shoulder a bit. Fortunately, things are better than last year in more than one way. But I do miss talking to you, just one-on-one like we used to. So, sure, I'll stay a while. I can complain about Ron's Quidditch obsession." Harry laughed, and they ended up talking for another hour.

That night, Harry put on his pajamas, shut the curtains on his bed, and got under the covers. Just as he was about to look at his hand, it started tingling. "Hey," he whispered, looking at the image of her face in his hand. "Are you okay? You look kind of sad."

She shrugged, which he could tell even though he only saw her face. "I just had a talk with Hermione. She said she had the same talk with you earlier."

"Ah, about Corner," he said. "You don't feel bad about what you did, do you?"

"Hell, no," she said emphatically. Then, "Well, not bad exactly, just that it definitely fails the Dumbledore test, doesn't even come close. He would have just ignored it, decided it didn't matter."

"But he wouldn't have done it at age sixteen, I'd bet," he said. "And as you and Hermione have told me before, it's too high a standard to really use."

"That's true," she agreed. "She also told me something she said she didn't know when she talked to you. This isn't firsthand, but she heard that Corner has been saying to Ravenclaws that he's sure that I let the match go on so long on purpose, and he thinks maybe you told me to do that."

Harry laughed. "Anyone who thinks that I tell you to do things and you do them doesn't understand the way our relationship works."

"Well, you did tell me to move to Seeker, and I did it. He probably assumes it's something like that, maybe you told me on your hand later, or passed me in the air and said it quickly. I have been asked by several people today if I did that on purpose. To most people, I denied it, but Terry also asked, and I knew he was asking for Michael. I just told him that I wasn't saying, that I'd just as soon he wondered about it. Terry didn't ask anything more, he just left. After that, I decided that if Michael asks me himself, I'll tell him, you're damn right I did, and I don't regret it. He won't ask, though."

"So, what, does he think that Swanson also let the match drag on?"

"I don't think so, but Hermione also said she heard a few things about that. Apparently he was mad at her, too, for not managing to find the Snitch. Where people could hear, in the Ravenclaw common room, he complained about it. He said things like, if Cho could find it in twenty-eight seconds, surely she could find it in an hour and a half. A few other things like that, about how good Cho was, how she caught the Snitch in all three matches last year, even the one against us.

"So, an hour later, at dinner, this got back to Swanson. It turns out that while she may be only a third year, she's no wilting flower. She looked for him, found him in the common room, and gave him a piece of her mind. She told him, among other things, that she was quitting the team, and that he was welcome to bring Cho back if he loved her so much. She finished by telling him exactly where he could stick his broom."

Harry laughed out loud, then tried to keep it down for the sake of his dormitory-mates. "I shouldn't laugh, but it is funny. He deserved what he got from us, and he deserved that, too. I wonder if he's going to wake up and figure out he made a mistake, instead of trying to blame it on other people. First Colin, then you and me, then her. To me, it kind of punches a hole in Hermione's 'it was in the heat of the moment' thing. He insulted her, too, just not to her face. He really needs to calm down."

"Well, I wasn't sad earlier, just unhappy that the whole thing happened. It's nobody's fault but his, though, for sure. By the way, I wanted to say I'm sorry if that joke about the nine thousand people bothered you. I wasn't trying to make fun

of you for being sensitive about that, I really do understand. I was just trying to make a joke, but I should have waited until I could find a better one."

"That's okay, I wasn't that bothered. We all know how you are, about making jokes, and how I am, about the 'look at Harry Potter' thing. We're all just being ourselves, I guess."

"Nothing wrong with that," she agreed. They talked for another ten minutes before signing off. He did his Occlumency exercises, then went to sleep.

1

"Hello, Albus," said Harry happily, as Dumbledore approached. "I guess you probably have some comments about what happened today."

"I will be happy to discuss anything you would like, but it will have to be another night," said Dumbledore, his expression grave. "The attack on the castle which we have long feared has just been launched."

1

Oh, my God, thought Harry. I have to wake up. No, wait. Very anxious, he asked Dumbledore, "What can you tell me? What's happening?"

"There is some time before they will reach Hogwarts, perhaps thirty minutes," said Dumbledore. "The attackers are as was expected: Death Eaters and non-Death Eater helpers, giants, and dementors. I do not know the quantities involved. Their speed is limited by how fast they can travel to Hogwarts while keeping the giants under magical cloaking, invisible to Muggles."

Harry wondered why they cared whether the giants were invisible to Muggles, then decided it could wait. "This must

be everything he's got."

"I believe so," agreed Dumbledore. "If this battle is won decisively, it could deal a crippling blow to Voldemort."

"Then, we will," said Harry, determined. "How do they plan to get past Hogwarts' magical defenses?"

"They have re-acquired the fourth piece of the Four Corners artifact," said Dumbledore. Sensing Harry's incredulity and unasked question, he added, "How it was done is not of importance at the moment. It has not yet been deployed, I believe; they plan to do so when the giants are near Hogwarts. Deploying and activating it now might give you time to find it."

Makes sense, thought Harry. "Okay, I should go wake up."

"There is one more thing. Taking the castle is only his secondary objective; the primary one is your death. You could stay on the sidelines of the battle, but he knows you will not do so. He pins his hopes on the giants in particular. He plans to illuminate you in some way to make you a better target, but I do not know exactly how."

What's he going to do, Harry wondered, put a searchlight on me? "Okay, thanks, Albus. See you tomorrow."

Harry woke up, then bolted upright in his bed. He almost woke Ron and Neville, but decided that he had to see it for himself before he woke anyone. Fawkes hovered in the air next to his bed; Harry threw on his Aurors' robes over his pajamas, grabbed his wand, then Fawkes's tail, and was gone.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 21, The Battle: In the battle to defend Hogwarts, Harry becomes far more emotional than he'd thought he would after seeing his friends injured and in great peril, risking the loss of his ability to use the energy of love.

From Chapter 21: Harry slumped forward on his broom, unable to think about or do anything. The next thing he knew he was being guided up. He looked up to see Dawlish, an arm around his side, taking him up and out of range of other giants.

He received an intense impression from Hermione. Stop it, her feelings pleaded with him. Stop doing that, you'll lose the ability to use the energy of love. We need that, you need it. We'll find some other way, but stop doing that. It's hurting you, you have to stop.

21. Chapter 21

Chapter 21

The Battle

He was suddenly outside, several hundred feet in the air, looking at a stretch of countryside illuminated by a full moon over a cloudless night sky. Looks like Remus is going to miss this, Harry thought as he looked around and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Harry's Auror-acquired knowledge of England's geography had guided Fawkes to where Harry thought the Death Eaters might be, based on the attack route the Aurors expected. Figuring they probably weren't too far away, Harry emptied his mind and focused on detecting Dark magic. He had never tried to do it from so far away, but knew the 'signal' would be so strong that he had a chance of sensing it. Less than a half a minute later, he had it. Fawkes disappeared, and Harry was suddenly in a different place, higher in the air so he wouldn't be detected. He could see Death Eaters on brooms, and sense dementors, but he saw no giants. Activating the spell the Aurors taught him to identify objects hidden by magic, he suddenly saw fourteen giants, in two rows of seven, trailed by dozens of Death Eaters, Dark wizards, and/or Voldemort helpers.

Harry gave a start as, in an instant, Flora and Hermione were next to him, hovering in midair as he was; he realized that Flora knew through Fawkes what had happened, and had awoken Hermione. Without a word, Harry changed the hand holding Fawkes's tail from the right to the left, and put his arm around Hermione's shoulders, as she put her left arm around his waist.

He sent her an image of what he had just seen, then the information he had learned from Dumbledore. She sent him a feeling of confidence. We can do this, we'll be all right. He sent back the same feeling, to communicate that he agreed. He then sent her an image of him at Auror headquarters, telling them. She sent to him that she intended to wake McGonagall, who would then activate the schoolwide alarm that would wake everyone.

Not having spoken a word, but having communicated a great deal, they both disappeared. Harry alerted the Aurors, then appeared back in his dormitory. "Everybody up!" he shouted. He yanked back the curtains of Ron's bed to reveal a very sleepy Ron. Just then, the alarms went off, and Ron went from nearly asleep to awake in a second.

"What's going on?" asked Ron.

"The castle's under attack," said Harry, speaking into his hand so Ginny could know at the same time. As the others scrambled to get dressed, Harry Summoned his broom and headed out of the dormitory.

Empty when he reached it, the common room quickly filled up, as people stumbled or ran from their dormitories. He stood in front of the portrait hole, silent until most of the students were there. Very conscious of the clock ticking, he didn't wait for every last person to come out before speaking. Many looked alarmed, frightened, or bewildered.

"I'm speaking right now as your Head of House," he announced. "The castle is under attack; the attacking forces should arrive at the castle in about a half an hour. Some of us will be going out to fight them in a minute. Sixth and seventh years who are seventeen or older can join if they

want to; sixth years who aren't seventeen can join if their parents haven't forbidden it."

He was about to continue when Dennis shouted, "Professor, I'd like to come too. I'm a good flier, and—"

"Yes, you are, and I'd love to have you," Harry interrupted him, "but this is Professor McGonagall's decision. Jennifer, Dave, you're in charge here after I've gone. It's very important that everyone follow their instructions. Soon after we've left, Fawkes and Flora will conduct an evacuation. You're to go three at a time. The middle person, which should be the biggest person, should grab the phoenix's tail, after the others have put their arms around his or her shoulders, like this." Neville and Hermione stepped to Harry's side and demonstrated. "You'll be taken to the Ministry, where you'll get more information, but probably not immediately. They'll be busy, too. The important thing is, you'll be safe."

"Those who are coming, follow me. We're meeting on the grounds, between the lake and the gate." Harry turned and exited the portrait hole, followed by, he suspected, most or all of the Gryffindor sixth and seventh years.

Harry met McGonagall, Snape, and Flitwick on his way out of the castle; each was carrying a broom. "Thank goodness for Albus," said Harry. "They could have been on us before we knew it. And you were definitely right about the time, Professor," he added to Snape, who had predicted a pre-dawn attack.

"One needs only to read a book on military tactics to make that prediction," responded Snape. "It is common sense."

"Why are they keeping the giants under a cloak?" asked Harry. "Why should they care if some Muggles see them?"

"The Dark Lord would be concerned that the Muggle military could get involved," said Snape. "There is not a high likelihood, but he would prefer to be careful. He has his own reasons for not wanting Muggles to know about the existence of wizards."

As had been the case when he had gone to observe the oncoming forces, the moon provided plenty of light. Looking around, Harry was struck by the natural beauty of the Hogwarts grounds, but he knew he couldn't linger on that thought.

As the last of the older students arrived, Harry started speaking, raising his voice so everyone could hear him. "I went out for a look before we woke everyone up. They should be about twenty minutes away by now, somewhere between ten or fifteen by the time we intercept them. Aurors will be joining us on the way, as well as some non-Aurors who've been fighting Voldemort since he came back." As he spoke, he knew that Arthur and Molly would be among them; he wasn't happy about it, but knew they felt they had to, and that it would be hard for them to know that he, Ron, and Ginny would be going into danger. "The opposing forces consist of about eighty to a hundred Dark wizards, a hundred to a hundred and fifty dementors, and fourteen giants."

He saw a few people flinch at that, and having seen one up close, he could certainly understand. "Do not get close to the giants, whatever you do. Remember, they are very hard to affect with magic. Leave them to the Aurors.

"Operate in groups of five or more, like we talked about in class. Make sure you have at least one person who can do a Patronus, but I know most of you can, so it should be no problem. You'll be doing lots of Patronuses; at least one

member of every group should have the specific responsibility of looking out for dementors. Not that you won't know they're coming, of course, I've told you all about their effects."

"Harry, who's with you?" asked Justin.

"Just Ron and Ginny," he answered. "I need to be very maneuverable, and with their brooms, they can keep up with me. Okay, let's--"

Hermione stepped forward and turned to address the group. "Harry apparently didn't feel this was worth mentioning, but we just found out that he's going to be a specific target, that they have a plan to make him more obvious to them somehow. If you see Harry, Ron, and Ginny in trouble, and you can help, you should do so. I think you all know that Harry has the ability now to defeat Voldemort, we can't risk losing him."

"Aurors will join his party before we reach the battle," said McGonagall to Hermione. "Aurors on Firebolts," she added to Harry. "But I second what Professor Granger said, in any case. Professor Potter and his party could be overwhelmed."

"If we are, we'll run," he said, hoping to dissuade people from keeping their eyes on him; they would have enough to worry about. He didn't want to openly contradict McGonagall, however. "This is only if you happen to notice; don't be looking for me."

"I think they'll notice by the huge group of Death Eaters chasing us," said Ron; Harry couldn't tell whether he was nervous or was being humorous.

"Let's go," said Harry, not wanting to lose any more time than he had to. Sixty students and ten professors mounted

their brooms and flew off into the night.

Six minutes into the trip, Harry was starting to feel the effect of the cold. For winter, it was a relatively warm night, but being in the cold air for a long time was uncomfortable, as he knew from having done it when leaving Privet Drive two and a half years ago. Still, he knew that he would soon be so busy he wouldn't notice the cold.

"Slow down," Ginny admonished him, speaking into her hand. "I know you need to be in front because you know where we're going, but we don't want to get that far ahead of the group. You know what McGonagall said."

"Yes, I know, that she doesn't want me ahead of the group when we get there," he said out loud, slowing down to be parallel to her. "You told me that after we took off."

"Well, it looked like you needed to be reminded."

"So, she told you to make sure I didn't get too far ahead, and made sure our party was joined by Aurors. Anything else she hasn't told me?"

"You'll be told when you need to know," she said; he wasn't sure whether or not she was joking.

"Glad to hear it. Just don't try to stop me from doing anything I want to do."

"You can fly right up to a giant and poke it in the eye, for all I care, just as long as you understand that we're going with you."

Harry remembered her saying that she wanted him to consider any risk to him as if it were a risk to her. He winced in discomfort at the thought of it, but he knew he couldn't

think about that then; he had to do what he thought was best. On his other side, Ron asked, "So, Harry, are you on board with this whole giant-eye-poking thing? Because if you wanted to skip it, that'd be okay with me."

Grim as his last thought had been, Harry couldn't help but chuckle. "We'll see how it goes."

"Speaking of their eyes," continued Ron, now serious, "are the Aurors going to be using the Conjunctivitis Curse? When Hagrid told us that story—"

"No, they don't plan to," Harry interrupted Ron, anticipating the rest of the sentence. "Kingsley said that they expect the Death Eaters will have put some protection spell on the giants' eyes, that they'd anticipate that spell. They'll try it once just to be sure, but they don't expect it to be effective. The Death Eaters and dementors will be a big problem, but dealing with the giants will be the important thing."

"When do you expect them to set up the artifact?" asked Ron.

"Probably not until the giants have reached the Hogwarts grounds, or are very close to it," said Harry. "The giants won't be affected by Hogwarts' magical defenses, so the main reason for turning it on then would be so we couldn't fight the giants once they got past the castle walls. Well, nobody but us six, Luna, and Winston. And that wouldn't be nearly enough against fourteen giants. And if the giants get inside the grounds, they can let Death Eaters in, block anyone else, then withdraw the artifact, and they have the castle. Like I said, the giants are the key."

Harry turned his head every minute or so to make sure the others were still behind him, which they always were. Very soon, he saw several dozen wizards on brooms intercept

them from their right; Harry could easily see that they were the Aurors, along with Order members. Looking through the crowd of brooms, he could see Arthur, Molly, and the rest of the Weasleys, and worried again. They're probably worried about Ron, Ginny, and me, he thought, but we're better able to protect ourselves.

Kingsley maneuvered into the Hogwarts crowd to fly next to McGonagall, as Tonks and Dawlish moved to join Harry's group. He wasn't surprised to see Tonks, but was to see Dawlish, who usually didn't have much to do with him. I'm really getting high-powered protection, he thought, knowing that Dawlish was perhaps the most powerful Auror. Catching Harry's surprised look, Dawlish gave Harry a wry glance. "I just want to be here when some new spells get invented."

"There they are," said Ron.

Harry looked ahead and saw the giants, a few hundred yards in the distance; it reminded him of something he'd wondered briefly when he'd first seen them. "Dawlish, why don't the giants have any weapons?"

"Probably because the giants themselves are pretty good weapons, and Voldemort wouldn't trust them not to get carried away with extra weapons and use them on whoever was nearest," explained Dawlish, looking intently at the giants. "Or each other. We can always fly above them anyway, no matter what weapons they have, and we could use Repulsion Charms if they gave them projectile weapons. No, they're just going to dare us to try to stop the giants, and if we can't, they just march to the castle."

"That's not going to happen," muttered Harry.

"See, they can see us, that's for sure," said Dawlish. "They're not doing anything different, except they've taken off the

cloak you said was on them. They're waiting for us to make the first move. They're not going to break their formation unless we can show that we can hurt the giants."

Here we go, thought Harry. He slowed down and descended to twenty-five feet, roughly eye level to a giant. The giants were at about one hundred yards and closing... seventy... fifty... thirty...

At what he guessed was twenty yards away, Harry pointed his wand at the nearest giant, and focused on creating a blinding light. A narrow, powerful beam of light came out of his wand. It was far stronger than anything he had done in practice, so strong that he had to squint, and he saw that others around him did as well. The giant was knocked back, as if by a physical force. He roared in anger, then charged forward; the other giants immediately did so as well.

"Harry, up!" shouted Ginny. Deciding to get one more shot in, Harry pointed at the next closest one and fired again. This one was knocked back as well, but the other ones were very close. Harry quickly turned and shot upwards, the others in his group with him. The nearest giant's swing missed Ron by less than a second as he followed Harry away. "Don't cut it that fine anymore!" Ginny shouted at him. "Remember, you're not the only one that can get hurt because of it!" He nodded, silently promising to be more careful, or at least to not take chances like that unless it was truly important.

"Avada Kedavra!" shouted a chorus of voices. Turning, Harry was surprised to see that it wasn't Death Eaters shouting it, but Aurors. A hail of green bolts sailed downward and hit their target. The giant staggered back, barely staying on her feet. Harry contributed a Stunning Spell, which seemed to have a small effect of its own.

Suddenly, the night became much colder, and Harry started to feel disoriented. Knowing immediately what it was, he summoned the memory of Ginny's reaction when he first told her he loved her, and a brilliant white stag came out of his wand. It was one of many, and the dementors started retreating, but they had accomplished their goal: they had distracted the Aurors from their attack on the giant. A few dozen Dark wizards flew up to harass the Aurors further, firing spells at them while maneuvering around on brooms, trying to deny the Aurors clear targets. Other Dark wizards followed the dementors in attacking the Hogwarts group. Twenty feet to his left, Harry saw a group of students recoil from an area-effect spell. Deciding that the students needed more help than the Aurors, he sped in their direction, firing off Stunning Spells as he went. One connected, and the opponent fell off of his broom. It reminded Harry of the problem of fighting at that height: they were out of reach of the giants, but being knocked off of one's broom was possibly deadly. The fall could kill, and unencumbered Death Eaters could easily finish off anyone on the ground. Harry knew that part of the Order members' jobs was to catch people who fell, Summon their brooms and wands, and get them to safety. He also knew that while their side had a technical numerical superiority, some of their manpower was being used for such defensive purposes as that and warding off the dementors. In terms of sheer offensive capacity, they were outnumbered.

As Harry flew closer, he decided that Imperius Charms were the way to go, if possible. He tried one on an enemy who was ten yards away, but it didn't work; he then had to focus on defensive spells as he became a target, then dementors attacked again. Harry conjured another Patronus, and realized that he should get in the habit of doing it every fifteen seconds or so, as a routine defensive measure.

Another look around told him that the giants were moving on ahead, but they were now running. It was a slow run, more like a jog, but because of the giants' size, they covered ground very quickly. He knew this was one possible strategy the Death Eaters might employ in such a situation: if the giants could fight anything in range, they would, and if not, they would proceed to the castle. It made sense. Harry quickly debated whether to stay and help the students, or to go chase the giants. Almost immediately, he got an impression from Hermione. Go after the giants, she communicated. Neville and I will take over here, let people know when it's time to retreat.

Shooting off a few more Stunning Spells, Harry turned and flew towards the giants; it would take him less than a minute to catch up to them. Looking at his hand, he said, "Tell the others, be ready to ascend quickly." He heard her relay his instructions as he neared the giant who was lagging behind. Ron and Tonks conjured Patronuses as Dawlish shot off spells at the nearest Death Eater. Harry hoped it wouldn't distract the giant, but it didn't seem to.

How close dared he get? He had just seen the Imperius Charm fail with a wizard from a range of ten yards, and these were giants, resistant to magic. He had to get close enough that he could be swatted away if he were discovered; there was just no choice. He looked into his hand. "I have to get close, but you don't have to. Just be ready to distract him if he notices I'm there."

He flew closer, until he was four feet from the giant's back. Deciding that was close enough, he pointed his wand and focused on infusing the giant with love. The giant continued running, oblivious. Harry continued to concentrate, thinking about nothing else, trusting the others to warn him of any danger. He had been doing it for about twenty seconds when

he heard Ginny in his head, shouting a warning. One of the other giants, the one nearest the one Harry was trying to affect, had seen their party; she shouted at the other one, and swerved to try to bat Harry away. Harry turned his broom so that it pointed to what had been his left, and shot away, barely escaping the giants' outstretched hands.

He ascended to a safe height, swearing in frustration. Facing the others, he said, "Okay, I want to get out in front of them, do the light thing again. Maybe I can slow them down."

"You know that Death Eaters are fighting Aurors over there, right?" asked Dawlish.

"I know. Maybe I can sneak up behind a few Death Eaters with the Imperius Charm. Let's go."

They flew off above the giants, who were still running at a steady pace. As they were past half of them, Harry looked behind him and, squinting in anticipation, did the flashlight spell on the trailing giant. The giant shouted in pain and fell, hands over his eyes.

One problem with the spell, Harry now realized, was that it was very visually obvious; everyone on the entire battlefield would know it was happening, and therefore know where he was. So much for sneaking up behind a few Death Eaters and doing Imperius Charms, he thought. Still, the giants were the first priority. Or, should he focus on the Death Eaters nearest the giants, hoping he could help get rid of enough of them so that they could fight the giants unimpeded?

His thoughts were interrupted by more dementors swarming around them, obviously attracted by the light. Death Eaters soon followed, having disengaged from the Aurors. They closed around Harry and his group. Harry warded off spells

as best he could, and he saw a Killing Curse shield go up around Ginny. The Aurors reached them, causing the Death Eaters to retreat, and one to fall off his broom. Looking ahead, Harry saw that the giants were now a few hundred yards closer to Hogwarts than they had been when he knocked down the other one, who was just now getting up.

"Harry! Cover us!" shouted Kingsley. Harry looked around, shooting off Stunning Spells at anything that got close.

"Avada Kedavra!" shouted thirty voices, and Harry now understood why they were asking him to cover them: they wanted to finish off the one that was down. Death Eaters attacked the Aurors; they got close enough that Harry was able to do the Imperius Charm on one, who screamed and fell off his broom. Harry focused on another, who turned and put an area-effect spell on his comrades. So, they're not all Death Eaters, thought Harry, since this one hasn't been Cleansed.

The other Dark wizards recoiled, and three shot Killing Curses at him. Acting reflexively, Harry put up his Killing Curse shield around the wizard. Harry knew the Aurors might prefer that he let the wizard be killed, but he was doing a good job of distracting his comrades.

Harry shot off more Stunning Spells, then gasped as he saw Ron get hit, and fall off his broom while the Aurors tried to finish off the giant on the ground. Harry and Ginny dove; Harry caught him fifteen feet above the ground. Thank God there aren't any giants right here, he thought. Ginny Summoned Ron's Firebolt as Harry Summoned Ron's wand, which he had dropped.

"Give me his broom!" Harry shouted to Ginny, who tossed it to him. Harry caught it in his free hand, straining under

Ron's weight as he held onto Ron with his other arm. He Disapparated, appearing in the emergency room of St. Mungo's. He put the wand in Ron's hand and the broom across his stomach so that Ron could return to the battle if he felt well enough to. He thought he saw Ron's eyes flicker, but he couldn't wait around for Ron to regain consciousness. I think he's okay, Harry told himself. He has to be okay. Harry refused to entertain the alternative.

He Disapparated again, finding himself on the ground slightly away from the battle area. Mounting his broom and taking off, he asked Ginny on his hand where she was, then shot ahead in pursuit.

It took him less than a minute to catch up. They were with the Aurors, and the group of students and Order members had made their way back from the site of the first engagement. The scene was chaotic, as Harry had been told battles usually were. Some Order members were constantly creating Patronuses, and some were attacking Dark wizards in groups of ten. As he flew through it, Harry shot off Stunning Spells at the Dark wizards nearest to him, then remembered what he should be doing, and put the Imperius Charm on the next few he passed. He realized that the Imperius Charm was better for more than one reason: the Stunning Spell could miss, whereas the Imperius Charm worked differently, and always reached the person who it was aimed at, if they were in range.

As soon as he got in front of another giant, still at a safe height, he directed the flashlight spell at the giant's eyes; again, this giant shouted in pain and stumbled, but didn't go down. Harry swooped down into the danger area-as he thought of it, any altitude below forty feet was a risk if giants were anywhere nearby-and maneuvered for a clear

shot at the giant's eyes. He finally found one, and used the spell again; the giant went down.

Aurors, who had come over when they had seen the light the first time, started firing off Killing Curses; Harry flew back toward them to protect them from the Dark wizards he knew would be harassing them. Two down, twelve to go, he thought, but there's no way we can get enough of them by the time they reach the school. He knew the evacuation would be complete, but Death Eaters couldn't be allowed to occupy the castle, because it would be very hard to take it back once they had it, and resumed its magical defenses.

He flew ahead again, pushing the limits of the Firebolt's speed. As he caught up to the giants again, he could see Hogwarts in the distance, and despaired. It's going to be too late, he thought. He zoomed ahead of the pack of giants, this time using his flashlight spell on the lead giant, hoping others would trip over her as she went down. She did go down, but the others managed not to stumble over her. As he tried to get in position to do it to another one, Ron flew in and rejoined the group. Harry wanted to ask Ron if he was sure he was all right, but knew he couldn't take the time.

As the Aurors rushed over to take advantage of the next one down, Death Eaters followed them, and others joined from having been engaging the Hogwarts students; clearly protecting the giants was considered the top priority. The situation was even more chaotic than it had been: Patronuses of all sizes and shapes were flying about, pushing aside dementors; spells were flying through the air, and brooms were moving constantly as wizards on both sides tried to avoid being hit by enemy spells. It was impossible to focus on what was happening enough to understand the whole picture, so Harry just concentrated on what he wanted to do.

Getting to the clearest spot he could while still in visual range of a giant, Harry flew toward the one that was furthest away from the others. He shone the light in the giant's eyes; the giant stumbled and shielded his eyes. Again, Harry flew down to get a better shot to put the giant on the ground. Because the giant was shielding his eyes, it was difficult, but he finally got the position, and used the spell again. The giant screamed and went down; Harry was surprised that he wasn't being harassed by Dark wizards, but guessed that the others in his party were helping him with that.

He turned around on his broom to gain altitude again, and had almost reached forty feet when he heard a loud shriek. It wasn't the first one he'd heard since the battle had started, but it was the one that had happened nearest him, and he was sure he recognized the voice. Dread taking him over, he quickly turned to see Ginny flying through the air, and another giant at the end of his follow-through. He clearly hadn't gotten away fast enough, and Ginny had been behind him, covering him along with the others.

Terrified that Ginny would hit the ground and be stepped on, Harry instantly cast his spell on the giant, this time focusing on keeping it there even after the giant reacted. He stopped only because he realized that Ginny would soon hit the ground, and be injured more even if she wasn't stepped on. As he turned to levitate her, he saw Ron already doing so. She was hovering, no longer screaming but in obvious pain, one leg bent forward at the knee in such an obviously unnatural way that Harry winced. He flew to her, grabbed her around the shoulders as gently as he could, came to a full stop as Ron handed him her broom and wand, and Disapparated.

Again he appeared in the St. Mungo's emergency room, which was busier than it had been just a few minutes ago

when he had taken Ron there. He started to lay Ginny on the nearest empty bed, but she was levitated out of his grasp by a Healer.

"How bad is it?" asked Harry immediately, not realizing or caring that the Healer had laid eyes on Ginny just that moment. Obviously accustomed to frantic relatives, the Healer ignored him and concentrated on Ginny, waving his wand and clearly lessening Ginny's pain.

"Go back, Harry," she said, still in some pain. "They have me, I'll be okay."

"I need to know--"

"Go back, dammit!" she shouted. "They need you! I'll be fine, it only got me below the waist. Go!"

His chest tightening, tears threatening, he bent over and kissed her, quickly and urgently. Then he Disapparated, finding himself not too far from the battle, which was moving ever closer to Hogwarts. They can't be more than two or three minutes away, he thought. He kicked off the ground again, flying as fast as the Firebolt would go toward the battle, and to the castle.

As he neared the site of the battle, he saw something that chilled him: two Aurors were flying low, at about twenty feet, one from left to right and the other from right to left in front of the giants. It was obvious to Harry that this was a desperate tactic to try to delay the giants' advance onto the Hogwarts grounds, that they were hoping to lure the giants into chasing them instead of continuing forward. It was working; three giants were chasing each one, leaving only four giants continuing to Hogwarts.

Praying that the Aurors knew what they were doing, Harry continued ahead to where the four giants were heading. He knew there was no time to stop all four of them, and he was sure the other six wouldn't be distracted for long. Seeing the Hogwarts gate in the distance, he had a sudden idea. He zoomed past the four giants; as he passed, he saw Dawlish, Ron, and Tonks peel off to join him. All that time they let it sit there, thought Harry. I hope they never did move it.

Passing the edge of the battle, he looked to his left, and seeing yet another thing that threatened to stop his heart, did a double-take. Thirty meters away were a very familiar, and very small, group of people on brooms: the Slytherin second years. They were on the periphery of the battle; he saw them flying in two formations of five, and Killing Curse shields nearby. He wanted to turn and fly to them, scream at them to leave the battle, but again, he knew he couldn't spare the time. He flew on, his heart pounding in his chest. What are they doing here? he wondered. How did they get out here in the first place? They were supposed to have been evacuated, and I can't imagine all ten of them could sneak out past the Slytherin prefects. If they did, those prefects are going to hear about it from me.

He tried to stop thinking about it, but he couldn't; as he flew, he got more and more emotional. I can't cry in the middle of a battle, he thought, feeling it was ridiculous to even have to think about it. But that was what he wanted to do just then. He reflected that going into battle was bad enough, but it was worse when virtually everyone you cared about in the world was out there with you, taking the same risks.

Unable to cry, he felt anger rising up. At the Death Eaters, at Voldemort, at the giants, even at the second years for doing something so irresponsible and risky. This has to stop, he

thought, we have to end this thing. Is it still there... yes, it is, it must be under that tent, that covering, whatever. I guess they didn't want it to rust.

Twenty yards outside the Hogwarts gate, with his wand Harry flung aside the tent to reveal the upside-down tank that, for some reason, had remained there since September. He lifted the tank until it was levitating next to him, then, concentrating on holding onto it, headed toward the battle just as Dawlish, Ron, and Tonks caught up with him. As he got closer to the battle, on his left he saw Hagrid and Grawp, both armed with long weapons with points at both ends, waiting. The last line of defense, he thought. Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

It took him less than half a minute to reach the nearest giant. The giant didn't see him approaching from the side until Harry was within ten yards of him. The giant turned his head. Concentrating for all he was worth, pouring his emotions into what he was doing, Harry swung the tank around and smashed the giant in the head with it. As the tank made contact, Harry felt a terrible headache come on, but one like he had never felt before. He immediately knew what it was: a warning that he was doing something he shouldn't be doing, something that went against the energy of love. He didn't know whether the tank had killed the giant, but he knew it possibly could. He winced in pain, but held onto the tank and looked for another giant. I have to stop them, he thought, them taking the castle is unacceptable. I can stop them.

Another giant ran past, seemingly oblivious to what had happened to the last one. Harry wound up for another swing, and hit the next giant in the back of the head, sending her sprawling forward. Harry screamed in pain as another headache came on, this one worse. He dropped the tank, not

because he wanted to, but because he couldn't hold onto it. He slumped forward on his broom, unable to think about or do anything. The next thing he knew he was being guided up. He looked up to see Dawlish, an arm around his side, taking him up and out of range of other giants.

He received an intense impression from Hermione. Stop it, her feelings pleaded with him. Stop doing that, you'll lose the ability to use the energy of love. We need that, you need it. We'll find some other way, but stop using the tank. It's hurting you, you have to stop.

He gasped for breath, and reached up and patted Dawlish on the arm to indicate that he was all right; Dawlish removed his arm. Fawkes suddenly appeared above him and started to sing; Harry wondered whether he was finished with the evacuation, or if he just knew that Harry needed his support. He felt the song lift his mood, as it always did. I have to find some other way, he thought, echoing Hermione's thoughts. He realized he was using the tank in anger, and the anger was probably what was hurting him as much as the possibility that he might kill a giant.

He looked for the tank, but before he saw it, he was suddenly hit by something physical. He looked down and, to his great surprise, saw something that looked like water on his robes. A crowd of Aurors was starting to form around him, and they fought and chased off the wizards who had hit Harry with the water, for what purpose he couldn't imagine. He resumed looking for the tank, and he saw a giant looking like he was about to pick it up. Just before the giant bent over, Harry hit him with the flashlight spell, and the giant went down. Good, thought Harry, no reduction in strength, I must have stopped in time. Knowing he couldn't leave the tank there for another giant to pick up and throw at Aurors or students, he levitated it, and heaved it off into the

distance, as far as he could throw it. To his astonishment, it sailed high and far into the air; it had to be a hundred yards, he thought. It landed with a crash right in front of the entrance to the Quidditch pitch.

He saw Ron, Tonks, and Dawlish looking at him in astonishment, and thought to make a comment about how far he'd thrown the tank, but realized that wasn't what they were astonished about. Looking at his torso, where they were looking, he saw a bright light, which seemed to be getting brighter and brighter. Oh, great, he thought, this is what Albus was warning me about—the idea they had about illuminating me. I didn't know he meant it so literally. He would be a beacon, an easily identifiable target, no matter where he flew. This is going to be fun, he thought sardonically.

Sure enough, dozens of Dark wizards started converging on his position. He took off, flying away from Hogwarts and the battle, Ron, Dawlish, and Tonks right behind him, and fifty Dark wizards trailing them. He felt his hand tingle. "Harry, I just want you to know I'm okay, they tell me I'm going to be all right. It's not good, but it's nothing they can't fix. I'm just not going to be able to rejoin the battle, to put it mildly."

He looked at his hand. "That's the best news I've heard all night. Both that you'll be all right, and that you won't be able to rejoin the battle."

He could hear the smile in her voice. "You would say that."

"Yes, I would," he agreed. Looking back, he saw Dawlish, Ron, and Tonks right behind him, matching his speed, and protecting themselves and him against any spells done by their pursuers that seemed likely to hit. Twenty seconds later, he realized with surprise that they weren't

outdistancing the Dark wizards. Not all of the initial pursuers were still with him, but at least thirty were. Did they all get Firebolts? he wondered. He had thought he could simply outrun them, but clearly he was going to have to think of something else.

Since he couldn't lose them, he decided that going away from the battle was the wrong direction. He started turning slowly, as a sudden turn would allow them to gain on him too much. As it was, they gained about five yards over the course of the turn. His next idea was to take them all the way to Hogwarts, on the grounds. He would fly low, and if the Four Corners artifact had been deployed, he would fall off his broom, but so would his pursuers. He would have working magic and they wouldn't, so he and Ron could take care of them easily. And if the artifact hasn't been deployed... well, I'll think of something else, I guess, he thought. He knew he would pick up more pursuers, but nobody could catch him, and those without Firebolts would quickly fall behind.

Approaching the battle site again, he decided to see if he could get in a flashlight shot at a giant without slowing down. The giants had made relatively little progress in the last minute; their protection had diminished when the Dark wizards had started following Harry, and more Auror Killing Curses were hitting them, causing them to stumble and try to evade the Aurors. One giant happened to be looking away from the battle, in Harry's direction, and Harry immediately took the opportunity. Descending a bit to get a better shot, his aim was again good, and the giant stumbled to one knee. Harry pulled up on his Firebolt for a quick ascent, barely out of the reach of a giant who jumped, arms extended, in hopes of swatting him. Didn't know they could jump, he thought.

Safely out of range of the giants, he descended again quickly, his comrades staying with him with no difficulty. He flew just over the walls of the castle grounds, being careful to avoid the lake and the Whomping Willow. He braced himself for a fall, but almost to his disappointment, it didn't happen. He sailed across the grounds at an altitude of four feet, followed now by forty Dark wizards. Looking over his left shoulder, he saw another ten off to his left, apparently anticipating a turn. Better turn right, he decided. Ascending again, he started the turn just before he would have left the Hogwarts grounds on the other side, in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. Looking over his shoulder again, he thought he saw a dozen small objects fall from the pursuing Dark wizards. He thought he must have imagined it, but that he should be sure; he decided to ask Filch to check the grounds after the battle. Then again, he thought wryly, I'd better do it myself. Harry knew Filch loathed taking instructions from him, which Filch was bound to do, as Harry was a professor and Head of House. If I ever do become headmaster, he thought, Filch is gone. There must be someone who's a nice person who would want the job.

Wondering momentarily why he was having such strange, random thoughts in the middle of a situation that seemed to demand his complete concentration, he focused again on the battle. How am I going to lose these people? It's like I'm wearing a huge, neon sign. He again sped past the battle; the giants were approaching the Hogwarts walls, which Harry knew wouldn't stop them. He imagined that the artifact was now being deployed. Great timing, he thought, but didn't want to turn around again. If the giants broke through, even he and the others who could use magic despite the artifact couldn't do much to stop them.

His hand tingled again. "I know you can't talk, I just want to say, I love you."

He smiled, and held up his hand. "I love you, too. Just running away, as fast as I can. Doesn't require much concentration."

"What's going on?" she asked.

"They got some stuff on me that makes me a huge, bright target. I'm being chased by thirty Death Eaters who must be on Firebolts. I can't lose them, but at least I'm taking them away from the battle."

To his great surprise, she said confidently, "That's okay, no problem. I know what to do. Just do what I say, okay?"

"Since I have no ideas right now, I'll be happy to. What is it?"

"First, start going up. I mean, straight up. Hold on tight to the broom. If you need to, use both hands, and don't talk, just listen."

Harry's eyebrows went high, but he started pulling the broomstick up, gradually so Ron and the others could follow.

"Yes, I see that look," she said. "Just do what I say."

"I am," he assured her, looking at his left hand while gripping the broom tightly with his right, which was difficult since it also held his wand. He wasn't worried, because he knew Fawkes would catch him if he fell. "Going straight up now. Feels strange, but kind of neat."

"Are they following?" she asked. "Tightly packed?"

He looked down, past Ron, Dawlish, and Tonks, who he imagined must have been wondering what he was doing.

"Yes, they're all following, in a pretty tight group."

"Good. Now, use the Imperius Charm, as an area-effect spell."

He shook his head quickly in surprise, thinking he must not have heard her correctly. "What?"

"Harry," she said urgently, "I just got a visit from Blaise here. He said it's a message from Albus, that you should do this. It'll work, just do it."

He didn't have to be told twice. Grasping the broom with his left hand, he pointed his wand straight down, and looked down. "Scatter!" he shouted to his party. They flew off in different directions, and he visualized the Imperius Charm as affecting a wide area, and cast it.

A field of silvery light emanated from his wand, expanding in the shape of a cone, with his wand as the tip. As it enveloped the crowd of pursuers, he heard screams, and saw many of them fall off their brooms. A dozen remained, which meant that they were allied with Voldemort, but not Death Eaters. It occurred to Harry that they were so far up in the air that those who fell would certainly die, unless someone was waiting to catch them. That thought made him wonder where Voldemort was; there had been no evidence at all of his participation in any of what had happened.

He saw Dawlish fly straight down; he wondered if it was to check to see if they would in fact be caught or not. Turning, he flew toward Ron, and exchanged a smile with him. He looked at his left hand and said, "It worked. Thanks, and tell Blaise to thank Albus for me."

"I will, but you know he hears you anyway. Now, go finish off the giants. It'll work on them, too. You don't need to get that close, just do it from fifty feet."

"That's great," he said enthusiastically, as he took the Firebolt to full speed again, Ron right behind him, Tonks and Dawlish further back, escorting the dozen surviving Dark wizards, still under the influence of the Imperius Charm. "But why didn't he tell me this before? It would have saved a lot of time, not to mention, some lives."

He thought he heard sadness in her voice; it must have been her sorrow at being reminded that lives had no doubt been lost. "You know he tries to avoid telling you stuff like this, that he does it only when he thinks it's absolutely necessary. The way they were chasing you, he must have felt like there was no choice."

He nodded. "Well, I shouldn't complain, just be happy that he told me when he did. I'm sure it'll end up saving a lot of lives, not just mine. I'm going to sign off, I'll let you know when it's over."

"Okay," she said. "Do you mind if I keep looking? There's not that much to do here."

He smiled. "Go ahead. I love you."

"I love you, too," she said, then went silent.

Flying next to him, Ron shook his head in wonder. "Pulled another one out of your hat, I see."

"Albus did, really," he corrected Ron. "He says it'll work on the giants, too. I'm not counting my chickens, though, until this is done."

Ron frowned. "Counting what chickens?"

"I'll explain later."

A few seconds later, they reached the scene of the current battle with the greatest concentration of Dark wizards. Harry cast the area-effect Imperius Charm; only one wizard screamed and fell off his broom, as the rest suddenly went docile. Harry mentally instructed them to throw down their wands, and fly over the lake and jump in, which they obligingly did. Moving on to another, smaller battle, he did the same thing, with the same results. He turned his attention to the remaining nine giants, who were within the Hogwarts walls, and advancing on the castle. One was holding the Whomping Willow, which he had clearly pulled out by the roots. He had apparently intended to use it as a weapon, but it was thrashing him violently.

Harry flew over and cast the Charm over the one nearest Hagrid and Grawp, who were just about to start fighting. The giant didn't seem affected for a second, then lost its aggressive posture, and just stood there. Harry moved on to the next one, and again it took a few seconds. The as-yet-unaffected giants shoved the affected ones in confusion; the Charmed ones did nothing in response. Within a minute, all nine giants were wandering aimlessly around the Hogwarts grounds, except for the one who was on the ground, curled up in a defensive posture and covering his face, being beaten by the Whomping Willow he had uprooted.

Just out of curiosity, Harry cast the new spell on the Willow. It had no effect.

The dementors had started retreating when Harry used his new spell for the first time near the castle; Harry wondered if somehow they knew that meant the tide of the battle had turned. He wanted to head back out to the path that had led to Hogwarts and find out if there were still any Dark wizards flying around, but he didn't, for fear that it was mainly his proximity that was keeping the giants under the Imperius

Charm. In any case, he was sure that the Aurors and the others would easily take care of any Dark wizards that remained; he figured they would probably have escaped the battle anyway, knowing it was hopeless.

Harry mentally instructed the giants to leave the Hogwarts grounds, but it didn't work. He wondered if this was part of the giants' general resistance to magic; it took an area-effect spell to work on one of them, and all it did was mollify them. Still, he wasn't complaining. Hagrid and Grawp came over and started guiding the giants away from the castle, Harry staying close just in case. Ron was with Harry, his most recent action having been pulling-magically, of course-the Whomping Willow off of the giant it was attacking. Harry imagined they would re-plant it, though he couldn't see the use for it, except that it sort of added to Hogwarts' character.

Pansy, Hermione, and Neville flew over and landed near them; Harry and Ron got hugs from Hermione and Pansy. Harry added a quiet "thank you" to Hermione when she hugged him; she just nodded. People from the Ministry started Apparating in, including a few with cauldrons full of a red liquid. Harry found Kingsley, who explained that the liquid was something that would pacify even giants for a long period of time, at least a day. To Harry's surprise, the giants picked up the cauldrons and drank the contents, with a little encouragement from Grawp. I guess it must work with giants, just not in the same way, he thought. It must make them more suggestible.

"There's no reason we can't go to St. Mungo's, is there?" Harry asked Kingsley as the last of the giants drank the potion.

"No, go ahead, things here seem to be under control. You five can Apparate freely until further notice."

"Thanks," said Harry, and all five were suddenly in the St. Mungo's emergency room. They saw Ginny in a bed in a corner of the large room, and quickly headed over.

There was a chair near the bed; Harry took it. He held Ginny's hand, kissed it, and looked at her with vast relief and love. "We're so glad you're all right," said Neville.

"Me, too," she said wryly. "That was close, I was lucky. And I'm glad that the Joining of Hands came in handy for something other than Quidditch."

Harry chuckled, and explained to the others what had happened. "But I'm surprised that Albus didn't just tell me himself, through Fawkes. It wouldn't have been a difficult message to send."

"He sent one through Blaise before," pointed out Ron. "He could've sent you that one himself, too. He must have had his reasons."

"Well," started Ginny, sighing a little, "I have a little confession to make. When I said I got the message from Blaise, it... sort of, wasn't quite true."

Harry's face expressed his puzzlement. "What do you mean? You got it from someone else? From Albus himself somehow?" Ginny shook her head. "In what way was it 'not quite true,' then?" he asked.

"In the way that it was a complete lie," she clarified, with some embarrassment and a hint of amusement. "I never got any message."

Hermione and Pansy smiled, but Harry was totally befuddled. "I don't understand," he said blankly.

"I had this idea a few weeks ago," she explained. "I was remembering how you changed the fire-suppression spell to make it an area-effect spell, and somehow I had the thought that in a battle, it would be really good if you could do the same for the Imperius Charm. I got the idea during one of the combat flying lessons. Then I remembered how it usually works with you, how you get them when you really need them. I thought maybe the way it works is that they work because you need them to work, you believe that they'll work. The flashlight spell worked much better now than in practice, because you needed it to, it was the real situation.

"I thought about telling you about my idea, but it realized it might not do any good—you might decide that it was impossible, then you wouldn't be able to do it when you needed to. I decided to wait, to only suggest it if the situation was that you desperately needed it, like the fire-suppression spell. Since I would be with you, I'd know the right time. My getting hurt changed that, but in a way, it made it better. You had only ever come up with the spells by yourself, you'd never had them suggested to you, so I thought it might not work. But because I wasn't with you, I could tell you it came from Albus. You'd believe me, and because it came from him, you'd be sure you could do it. And you were, and you did."

There was silence for a few seconds as everyone digested what Ginny had said. Finally Ron said, "Wow. And I thought I was devious."

"I hope this makes it into a history textbook someday," added Hermione. "He created the area-effect Imperius Charm under false pretenses."

With a sly grin at Harry, Pansy said, "He looks like he needs it explained again."

"I don't know whether to be annoyed that you lied," Harry finally said, "or to thank you for saving some lives, probably including mine."

"I know which one I'd pick," said Neville.

Harry nodded. "I guess I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. Or is that not a wizarding phrase?" he asked, turning to Hermione.

"They say it about dragons," she said, "but it has a different meaning. With dragons, it's because they could burn you to a crisp."

"Who would want a dragon as a gift anyway," wondered Ron. "Well, besides Hagrid, that is."

"I can't believe you did that," said Harry, still amazed. "You're really something."

He stood, and leaned over her bed to kiss her; she put her arms around his neck and held him there to prolong the kiss. Finally letting go, she smiled at him as he resumed his seat. "Remember, I'm fine from the waist up."

"I'll keep that in mind," he assured her. Turning to Hermione, he said, "And thank you, for helping me when I was going a little out of my head."

She explained to the others what she had done, then said to him, "Fawkes was sending, I could feel what you felt—both the emotion, and the pain, though not as strongly, of course. I was really afraid for you, which you probably got from what I sent you. I can understand why you got so upset, especially seeing the second years out there. I would've been too, if I were you. They're all okay, by the way, I saw them after the battle ended."

"Thank God," he said fervently. "I couldn't believe it when I saw them. How did they get out, anyway? The Slytherin prefects can't be that incompetent."

Hermione started to answer. "I don't know, but..."

She trailed off, as she started receiving the same information that Harry was. Their mouths hung open, to the surprise of the others. Emotion rose up in Harry yet again. "Fawkes?" he gasped. "Why would he do that?"

Hermione explained to the others. "Fawkes took them to the battle. During the evacuation, they asked him to take them there instead of the Ministry. He did." The others were now stunned, but not as much as Harry.

"I can't believe it," he said quietly. He felt like he should be angry, but he was too surprised to be angry. "Why... he would have known the pain that would cause me, he would feel it himself, and he would know that when he did it. Why?"

"I think I know, Harry," said Hermione somberly. "The answer is, for the same reason he helped you in the Chamber of Secrets. Fawkes responds to loyalty, loyalty to the person he's bonded to. The second years wanted to go because they wanted to help you. Fawkes knew that, and that would dictate what he did. He'll do anything he can to help someone who wants to help you, even if it isn't what you would want."

It was hard for Harry to accept, but he knew intuitively that it was true. Finally he sighed deeply, and said, "There's something very ironic about that."

"I'd say that's true," agreed Hermione. "He'll do what's best for you in one way, even if it's not the best in another. We all

face situations like that, though, where both choices have their good and bad points. Phoenixes will just decide in favor of loyalty."

"At least they're okay," he said. "I don't know what I would have done if any of them had died. Speaking of which... I really hate to ask this, but does anyone know..."

"I do," said Ginny sadly. "Everyone, wounded or dead, has come through here, and I've been keeping my eyes and ears open. Six of the Order members and the people helping them died, I don't think we knew any of them. One Auror, I didn't catch the name. And four students. Two sixth years, Wilma and Everett. And two seventh years, Jonathan and Ernie."

Harry closed his eyes. He had known all of them, of course, but Ernie most of all; Harry considered him a friend, if not a close friend. He looked up at Hermione, pain in his eyes, remembering what she had said after last year's Hogsmeade attack. "So, do you think we got off easy with four?"

"It's never easy, but of course I know what you mean," she said. "I think about sixty of us went out, so yes, four isn't that high a number, considering the kind of danger there was. We weren't an army, just a bunch of people doing their best, with no coordinated strategy. We did pretty well."

They sat in silence for a minute, contemplating their losses. Then Ginny asked, "What happened to the Death Eaters that were following you straight up into the air?"

Harry shrugged, so Ron answered. "The ones that fell, died. Dawlish checked and made sure. He thinks we were several hundred feet up by that time, like about a fifty-story building. No one's going to survive that. And unlike our people who fell, like me, there was no one to catch them."

"That reminds me, what about Voldemort?" asked Ginny.
"Did he ever show up?"

Ron answered again. "Dawlish said that at about the middle of the battle, the relays showed that he did, but he was obviously Disillusioned or under an Invisibility Cloak, or something. No one ever saw him, and no one's aware of anything he did. I think we know why he made sure to not make himself known."

"That's one good thing about what happened in December," said Neville. "He could have been a big factor here, if he hadn't been scared to show his face. But now, he's in a pretty bad way, isn't he? If any Death Eaters got away, it couldn't have been many, and now he's got practically nobody. I bet anyone who did get away didn't go back to him, so he's all by himself, more or less. He could recover, but he's in a much worse way than he was when he came back two and a half years ago."

"All because he couldn't leave me alone," said Harry. "He could have other Death Eaters that we don't know about, and he's Voldemort, anyway. We still have to be really careful. I just hope that nobody starts declaring victory."

"I promise to slap down anyone in the Ministry who does," said a nearby voice. Harry turned to see Bright standing behind him. Harry started to stand, but Bright put a hand on Harry's shoulder, keeping him down. "This isn't a formal occasion, Harry, it's all right. Just taking a tour. How are you doing, Ginny?"

"For someone who just had both legs broken, not too bad," she replied gamely.

He nodded, impressed. "To my surprise, I sense that you're telling the truth."

"Good thing you have to be in a line of sight," she said, smiling at Harry.

Bright looked mystified, but Harry didn't feel like explaining it just yet. "I assume they told you as soon as it happened?"

"Of course," he said. "It was pretty tense, since I couldn't get status reports, and there wasn't much I could do. Well, there was, but it was just things like making sure the potions for the giants were being made, that St. Mungo's was getting geared up, alerting crews to get rid of the bodies of any giants who died, like that. In other words, things that probably would have been done if I'd continued sleeping. But making sure that everything was ready made me feel somewhat useful, at least. I knew Kingsley would report when it was done.

"Well, I'm going to make the rounds, I just wanted to stop by and say hello. And, of course, to be one of the many who want to thank you, all of you, for what you did. Also, Harry, I meant what I said before. It's politically tempting, but I know better. No celebration, no gloating. We're still being cautious."

"Ginny!" cried an anxious Molly as she rushed to Ginny's side, pushing Bright out of the way in her haste to reach Ginny, who she leaned over and hugged tightly. Arthur was a few steps behind her; he stopped behind Harry's chair, which Harry vacated so Molly or Arthur could have it.

"Mum, you just shoved the Minister of Magic," teased Ron.

Still hugging Ginny, Molly replied, "He's a father, he understands."

Bright laughed. "Indeed I do, I would do the same if one of my children were on that bed." Turning to Arthur, he shook

his hand. "I want to thank both of you as well, for what you did tonight."

With a small shrug, Arthur nodded. "We do what we can."

"If everyone did that, we'd be very well-off indeed," said Bright solemnly. He said goodbye to the group, then moved on to the next bed. Harry turned his attention to watching Molly fuss over Ginny. It's over, he thought. For now, anyway.

It was five-thirty in the morning when Harry and the others finally returned to Hogwarts. The students had finished returning ten minutes ago, so Harry avoided Gryffindor Tower, not wanting to be asked for his account of what had happened just yet. He went to his quarters and lay down for a half hour, reveling in the silence, yet wishing Ginny were with him. He knew it would take far less long for her to heal than if she were being treated by Muggles, but he missed her anyway.

Deciding he wanted company after all, and reflecting on the irony of his choice, he walked to Snape's quarters, which weren't far from his own. He knocked on the door, which promptly opened. "Oh, it's you," said Snape, standing in surprise. "Come in."

"You were expecting someone else?"

"House-elves," Snape explained. "I requested that breakfast be delivered not long ago." Snape gestured Harry to a seat.

"I guess it is almost that time, I just hadn't thought about food," said Harry. He thought for a few seconds, then asked, "So, how badly do you think he's hurt?"

Snape didn't hesitate. "Very badly," he said, with obvious satisfaction. "I viewed the bodies of the Death Eaters killed

in the fall caused by your spell; to my surprise, a few were ones I did not know. He had clearly been recruiting, and I strongly suspect that he was not being as selective as he once would have been. I have been able to ascertain that nearly every prominent Death Eater is now dead, or soon will be. The only one still at large is Lucius Malfoy."

There was another knock on the door, and this time, it was three house-elves. They hurriedly set up the table, and Snape's food. "You are welcome to stay and join me, if you'd like," offered Snape.

Harry felt himself gaping, and tried to recover. "Yeah, sure," he said.

"Bring another serving, and another place setting," Snape brusquely instructed the house-elves. They bobbed their heads up and down, smiling, suggesting that there was nothing they would rather do than fulfill his request; they departed quickly.

"Help yourself to some bacon, or sausage, while you wait for yours," Snape suggested as he sat at the table. "They always bring far too much."

Harry knew that was true, so he sat opposite Snape and took a piece of bacon. Noting that Snape seemed in unusually good spirits, for him, Harry decided to risk a joke. "I see you haven't gotten around to trying to be polite to the house-elves."

"On the contrary," replied Snape casually, as he finished the first bite of his toast, "they are thrilled with my behavior, as it is so much improved over what it used to be."

"I guess I hadn't thought of it that way," Harry admitted.

"Besides, being polite would only encourage them," added Snape, seemingly amused now. "Look at how they treat you, how uncomfortable it makes you. I know you could not bring yourself to be rude to a house-elf, but it does have its advantages."

Harry chuckled a little. "I don't know if you ever saw this in my memories, but Hermione and Ginny both think that Dobby would just love to be my personal house-elf after I graduate and get my own place."

Snape looked even more amused; Harry felt as though Snape was trying not to smile. "Considering how he treats you, and your reactions to it, his being your house-elf would be much more a favor from you to him than from him to you."

Harry felt that was a strange notion, but he could see Snape's point. Deciding not to go further into the topic of house-elves, he asked, "Why do you suppose Malfoy wasn't with the ones who were caught or killed?"

Snape looked thoughtful. "I suspect that he was functioning as the Dark Lord's personal assistant, close to him at all times. In practical terms, the reason would be that if you found him, Malfoy's job would be to distract you-" Seeing Harry react, Snape rolled his eyes and said, "You really must get over your adolescent associations with that word-while the Dark Lord made his escape."

Somewhat embarrassed, Harry nevertheless protested, "I have to take my humor where I can get it, I don't get nearly enough as it is. Anyway, I guess that makes sense, about Malfoy. It must be really embarrassing for Voldemort, to need that."

"'Degrading' would be a more appropriate word," suggested Snape. "Even before this morning, that he would require such an escort would be a painful reminder of how far he had fallen. Now, he has far more to worry about. The best thing for him to do would be to adopt the lowest possible profile, and attempt to gather forces again. This defeat, however, may harm his reputation to such an extent that it will be difficult for him to acquire followers."

"By the way, the new spell you used to such great effect... I assume this was one of your sudden inspirations?"

Harry shook his head. "Not mine, actually. Why don't I just show you, it'll be quicker." Harry was so used to having Snape view his memories that it didn't seem like a big deal. He kept the memory of what had happened at that point in the battle in the front of his mind. Snape reached for his wand, cast Legilimens, and viewed the memory.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Fascinating. But I find it beyond surprising that the headmaster would interfere in such a way, so directly. It is contrary to much of what he has said in his current state; it is as if he handed you a powerful weapon when it was not certain that it was necessary. Your life was not in imminent danger; Aurors could have assisted you with your situation if you had allowed them to."

"Yes, but then the giants would have taken the castle, or destroyed it," pointed out Harry.

"True, but the headmaster has only intervened when your life was in grave peril," responded Snape. "That was not the case here."

"Well, it's sort of a good thing that thought didn't occur to me," said Harry humorously. "There is more to the story, in fact. This is from soon after the battle, when we were visiting

Ginny at St. Mungo's." Harry now focused his attention on the memory in which Ginny had explained how she had deceived him.

Snape viewed this memory, eyebrows high at first. He put down his wand, shook his head for a few seconds... then, to Harry's astonishment, started laughing. He laughed for a long time, almost half a minute. Harry knew Snape was laughing at his expense, but he smiled anyway, because he was so happy to see Snape laughing. Snape took a deep breath as his laughter died down. "Excuse me... that probably lasted longer due to the novelty of the sensation," he said, taking another breath. "People say, 'I haven't laughed that much in a long time,' that is probably not truer for anyone more than I.

"I really must remember not to underestimate Miss Weasley in the future. She may be only an average student, but she clearly possesses a native intelligence and imagination far outstripping yours; you would never have thought of doing something like that. The humor may only be apparent to someone who knows you as well as I do, and your slowness to comprehend what she was telling you only made it funnier."

Still smiling, Harry said, "At least I was right about one thing. I did say at one point that if you ever laughed, it would probably be at my expense. I do see the humor in it, of course. And I don't mind you having a laugh, all my other—well, I guess at the time, I was too surprised to think it was funny."

Harry had almost startled himself by having been about to say, 'all my other friends.' Did he really consider Snape a friend? It seemed a very strange notion, but thinking about it for a few seconds, he supposed he did, in a peculiar way. It

wasn't something he wanted to say out loud, however. Snape gave him a penetrating look, as though what Harry had been about to say had been obvious, and Snape was curious to observe Harry's own reaction to what he had almost said.

Just then, there was another knock at the door. Snape opened it with his wand, and three house-elves came in, one of them Dobby. "Harry Potter!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "The other house-elves told Dobby that Harry Potter was here, so Dobby had to come. Harry Potter has saved the castle, saved our home, our lives--"

"Your lives?" Harry interrupted, as the elves set up his food. "You could get away at any time--oh, that's right, they were going to deploy the artifact. But you could have used a phoenix to get away."

Dobby shook his head back and forth quickly. "House-elves must not leave their home, even if it is under attack. Many house-elves would have died. Harry Potter is so very heroic and courageous--"

"--and is surely far and away the most outstanding human being born in the history of the planet," said Snape, his sarcasm obvious, "and after a long life as our greatest leader, will be elevated to the foremost spot in the pantheon of gods. You may leave."

Dobby had been bobbing his head approvingly throughout Snape's comment, obviously in complete agreement. "Yes sirs, thank you sirs," said all the elves in chorus, and quickly left.

Harry gave Snape a long-suffering look. "Please don't do that. You said I shouldn't encourage them, and here you do it."

"I said nothing about you, I simply do not want to encourage them myself," Snape pointed out with amusement. Well, I wanted him to be able to enjoy humor, thought Harry. Now I hope he can enjoy some humor that isn't at my expense.

"Ah, I stand corrected," said Harry sarcastically. "But your having said that will make them like you more, since you recognize my obvious greatness."

"I had not considered that," Snape admitted.

"You were having too much fun," suggested Harry, now amused himself. "By the way, I wanted to ask, how is Neville doing in the Potions class?"

"I assume you are not asking about his potion-making skills, which are still subpar, but improving." Harry nodded. "He is doing adequately. He is becoming more comfortable, or perhaps I should say, less uncomfortable. The first time, it was clearly an act of will for him simply to show up. He made several mistakes of the sort he made in the past due to nervousness, but after I demonstrated that I would act tolerantly and not use them as a pretext to abuse him, he made fewer and fewer. I almost wonder whether he unconsciously made the mistakes on purpose to see how I would react."

"I don't know much about psychology, as you know," said Harry. "But I'm glad he's doing better. I know he's trying, I see him and Ron studying it together a lot. They try not to ask Hermione for help unless they really have to."

Harry then asked Snape for his account of his part of the battle, and ate his breakfast as he listened. It still felt strange to be having breakfast with Snape, but it also felt good.

After breakfast, Harry went to Auror headquarters and talked to Kingsley, getting more information about everything that had happened in the battle. They had captured forty-five Dark wizards, only three of whom were Death Eaters; most of the rest had been among those set free from the foreign wizard prisons. Harry wondered whether Voldemort would now try to recruit from the prison populations of the non-English-speaking countries; Kingsley told him that after the prison breaks, security at most wizarding prisons had been beefed up. Harry asked if the ones they had in custody now would be executed; Kingsley thought they almost certainly would, and that doing so would heavily complicate any future Voldemort recruiting efforts. Harry knew that was true, and tried not to think about it. He then visited Hagrid and Grawp; Grawp's English had significantly improved, and Harry was able to have a basic conversation with him, to Hagrid's obvious pride.

As he left the Forbidden Forest—due to Grawp's presence, they couldn't talk in Hagrid's hut—he was approached by Dennis Creevey. "Harry, could I talk to you for a minute?" asked Dennis anxiously.

"Sure, what is it?"

"I was wondering if you could talk to Colin. He seems really depressed."

"Do you know why?" asked Harry. Colin was usually cheerful, Harry knew.

"He won't really talk, but we—Andrea and I—think we know why. We think it's because he didn't join the battle. Our parents told him not to, and he's not seventeen, but we think that's why."

Harry had no idea that Colin hadn't joined the battle; he hadn't stopped to notice who had and who hadn't. "He might just need some time to work it through. But I'll go say hello to him, see if he's in the mood to talk. Where is he?"

"Ron looked on the map for me," said Dennis. "He's in the Quidditch stands, sitting in his usual spot for announcing the matches."

"Well, that's going to make my finding him a little more conspicuous," Harry joked. "But at least we'll be able to talk privately. Okay, I'll go there now."

"Thanks," said Dennis.

Harry walked off toward the stadium. As he walked, he glanced over at the lake, and saw someone sitting under the tree that both he and Ernie had sat under; a closer look told him it was Justin. Harry took a deep breath, as he felt Ernie's loss more keenly than he had since hearing about it. Imagining how it affected Justin, he guessed that Justin felt how he would feel if Ron had been killed. Harry considered walking over and sitting with Justin, but what could he say? No words about how worthwhile Ernie's sacrifice was would help, Harry was sure; no words at all would help. Continuing on his way to the Quidditch stadium, Harry sent his feelings and an image of Justin to Hermione. A few seconds later, she responded, letting him know that she would look for Susan on the map, so she could be with Justin if she thought it would help.

A few minutes later, Harry entered the stadium and walked to where Colin usually sat. Colin finally looked up and saw Harry as he climbed the last ten steps to get to where Colin was.

Colin gave him a quizzical look, obviously wondering why Harry was there. "Just felt like going for a walk," said Harry casually.

Colin chuckled. "At least you're not trying to fool anyone. Who sent you?"

"Dennis."

Colin shook his head. "So, I feel bad for not being very brave, and he sends the bravest person in England to talk to me. Good job, Dennis."

"He means well, Colin. But I can leave—"

"No, I didn't mean that. I know he doesn't want me to feel bad, he said it at the Ministry while we were waiting. It's just kind of ironic."

"He told me that your parents told you not to go."

"Yeah, and then he volunteered to go. That didn't make me feel much better."

"You did what your parents wanted you to do; you're not seventeen. That makes it the right thing to have done."

"Harry, at least four sixth year Gryffindors who aren't seventeen went even though their parents told them not to. There must be some difference between me and them."

"Would you have gone if your parents had said you could?" asked Harry.

"I think so," admitted Colin. "I hope so. But that's not what happened, so it's hard to say. It's also not easier because... I do think one of the reasons I didn't go anyway is that I don't

think I would have been that much help. I'm not a good flier, and I'm not that good at Defense Against the Dark Arts, you know that. I know the spells okay, I just can't do them as well as a lot of people can. It was easy to talk myself into not going, for that reason. But I can't get rid of the idea that I was just too much of a coward to go."

Harry could see the misery Colin was in, and he felt for him. "Colin, last year after Hogsmeade, I had a conversation like this with Ernie. He felt bad that he didn't join the Diffusion to save me. This year... he may have been Head Boy, but he wasn't that good a flier, and was below average in Defense Against the Dark Arts. But today, he went anyway."

Colin sighed. "And now he's dead, is your point."

"That's part of my point, yes," agreed Harry. "That was the risk, a very real one. And even though some went when they shouldn't have, that doesn't change the fact that it wasn't really your decision to make; it was your parents', and you did what you were supposed to do. Think about how they would have felt if you'd gone and gotten killed."

"I know," said Colin, nodding. "I talked to Cindy while we were waiting, she told me about the talk you had with her. The seven of us—the seven sixth years who didn't go—felt kind of conspicuous, and some of us talked to each other. None of us felt good about not going. I know what you said to her, I see the point. It's just hard for me to change the way I feel about it."

"It may just take some time," Harry suggested.

"I don't know," said Colin disconsolately.

As they sat in silence, Harry not sure of what more to say, he wondered whether he should have waited longer to talk to

Colin. I guess I'm not cut out to be a counselor, he thought. He looked at Colin and said, "Well, just keep in mind that I don't blame you, and I think you shouldn't blame yourself. I'm just glad you're still here."

"Thanks," said Colin. With a straight face, he added, "You go on ahead, I'll stay here and practice my Quidditch announcing."

Harry smiled. "Not that you need it, your announcing's very good. But you can work on more ways to give us positional information."

Colin chuckled. "I'll do that." Harry stood and gave Colin's shoulder a squeeze, then patted it, and started down the steps.

An hour later, going over the battle in his head, it occurred to Harry that there was another thing he should do before too much time passed. He contacted Pansy on her pendant and asked her to round up the Slytherin second years and meet him in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. As they filed in, Harry wondered how his dogs would have greeted them if he had used them. Already sitting on the conjured carpet, he motioned them to join him. Pansy sat to one side, neither with him nor with them.

He regarded them solemnly for a few seconds. Their expressions suggested that they didn't know what he was going to say; he realized he wasn't sure either. "Well... what I should say before anything else is that I'm very happy, and relieved, that nothing happened to any of you."

He was going to continue, but David spoke before he could. "We were really careful, Professor," he said earnestly. "We knew we weren't that strong, we considered that. We made sure to keep on the edge of the battle, away from groups of

Dark wizards. We put up Patronuses, Helen and Sylvia did Killing Curse shields. We just wanted to do what we could to help."

"We did our own research on battle tactics," added Derek. "We did a lot of hit-and-run stuff, had Ron teach us lots of maneuvers to avoid spells, used the Diffusion Charm a lot. Ten people works pretty well."

"I know you were careful," said Harry. "I'm very glad you were. But I'm sure you can imagine how I felt when I looked over and saw the ten of you."

They exchanged glances; it seemed to Harry that they had expected him to say something like that. "Professor," said Helen quietly, "Can you imagine how we felt when we looked over and saw you, shining brighter than the moon, being chased by dozens of Death Eaters?"

Harry opened his mouth to respond that he was much better able to take care of himself than they were, then closed it, realizing that it didn't matter. He thought in silence for a few seconds, then looked over at Pansy. "Did you ever tell them about that time on Ron's birthday, about Snape's searching —"

"Of course," she interrupted him. "And yes, it's a lot like that."

He exhaled heavily and looked at them again, still somber. "I get it, I understand. It's just that... you know how hard it was for me to get used to the risk that she," he gestured to Pansy, "and the others always take. With you, it's even harder, because of how young you are. I wanted to yell at you because you disobeyed McGonagall's instructions, but obviously, that would just be an excuse. I... I guess this is another thing I'm going to have to get used to."

"We're sorry, Professor," said Augustina. "I mean, we'd do it again, but I think we're all sorry for how it made you feel. But, like Helen said, you need to sometimes think about how we feel, too."

Harry nodded. "Another thing I wanted to tell you... a couple of seventh year Ravenclaws, Mandy and Padma, talked to me a little while ago. They wanted to tell me that you saved their lives with Killing Curse shields. If you hadn't gone out, at least two more people would have died."

"I guess that took the edge off of some of your wanting to give them a lecture," said Pansy sympathetically. Harry gave her a small, self-deprecating smile.

The second years exchanged impressed looks. "We didn't know who it was, but we're really glad," said Helen. "Like David said, we just wanted to help."

"You definitely did that," said Harry. "And I also wanted to say... that whatever else I may feel, I am proud of you." He saw in their faces their deep pride in hearing him say that, and he fervently hoped they would get no more chances to make him proud.

That night, soon after falling asleep, Harry found himself as usual standing near the stream. A few yards away stood Dumbledore, with Ernie next to him. Harry felt a wave of emotion as he walked over to hug Ernie. "I'm sorry."

Ernie nodded, and patted Harry on the shoulder. "Don't be. Albus has told me that I'm not the first person you've met like this." They sat down near the stream. "It must not be easy for you."

"It's not," agreed Harry, glancing down in sorrow.

"Albus has told me about that, about all the responsibility you feel for the people who die, who pass through here. When I was alive, it never occurred to me. It's hard for anyone to really understand that unless they're in your position, I suppose.

"He also said that some part of you was wishing today that you'd found some excuse to keep me back at the castle, some Head Boy-type reason, because you knew I was in more danger than others, since I wasn't the best flier or best fighter, to put it mildly. Part of why I'm here is to tell you that you shouldn't think that. I did what I wanted to do; I knew the risks. I'd have been really angry with you if you'd tried to get me not to go. You knew how I felt about not joining the Diffusion last year. If you'd tried to tell me not to go, I would've concluded that you'd decided I was a coward —"

"I never thought that," said Harry sadly.

"I know. But I'd already decided that I was, so it was easy for me to think that you thought that. I had to do this, that was the bottom line. I thought about not going, but I didn't want to be that person. Not because of you, but because of me. I'm sure you can understand that. Some things we just have to do." He paused, looking around. "And the afterlife is nicer than I thought it would be. You don't have to feel sad for me."

Harry took a deep breath, and slowly nodded. "I do know that, but I always think about the people left behind. Did you come here to say something to your parents?"

"Actually, no," said Ernie; Harry glanced up in surprise. "My parents loved me, but the way they expressed that tended to be conditional on my achievements. I'm not sure there's

anything I could say to them that would make them feel better. They're very sad, but they take solace in the idea that I died a hero. Head Boy, taking to his broom to defend his school, fighting the forces of darkness. It can make sense to them that way. They wouldn't want to hear that I wasn't a hero."

Harry's eyebrows narrowed. "Why do you say that?"

"The way I died... was not very heroic. All us seventh-year Hufflepuffs were together, and at one point in the battle, I got a little separated from them. I wasn't that good a flier, and I was slow rejoining them. I got disoriented, and went in the wrong direction—almost straight into a bunch of Death Eaters. It was over pretty quick."

Harry repressed an impulse to say 'I'm sorry' again, as he knew Ernie didn't need it. "That doesn't mean you're any less a 'hero' than anyone else who went to fight. You had longer odds, faced more danger, but you went anyway."

"I know. Mind you, I don't care whether I'm thought of as a hero or not, I was just talking about how my parents would see it. I know I did the right thing; I just made a mistake at a very bad time. Albus tells me a lot of people die in battle that way. I'm content with what I did."

"The main reason I'm here, actually, is for Justin. He feels bad, like it was his fault. He told himself he'd look out for me, and feels like he failed. He saw me just before I got killed, and wishes he'd been able to do the Killing Curse shield, feels that I'd still be alive if he had. I want him to know that he shouldn't feel responsible. He wasn't riding that broom; I was. There was nothing he could have done; it's just one of those things that happens. But the last thing he saw was me getting hit and falling off my broom, and I

wanted that not to be the last way he sees me. Albus said you could show this to him."

"I sure will," said Harry somberly.

Ernie nodded. "Justin, I just want you to know, I'm all right. Thanks for your friendship, and when you remember me, try to be happy. That's how I'll remember you."

* * * * *

A week later, on Sunday evening, Harry entered the Gryffindor common room and sat with the others, already working on homework. "What kept you?" asked Ginny, taking his hand as he sat. "You said you'd be here in a few minutes, and that was ten minutes ago."

"It was kind of a surprise," he said, keeping his voice down. "Corner stopped me, he wanted to apologize for last week, the Quidditch match."

"He apologized to you, but not to me?" asked Ginny indignantly.

"He said it was to both of us, he said to tell you," said Harry. "I think it probably would have been harder to do it with you, since you used to date him."

"Like I care about that anymore," she scoffed. "I'd be surprised if he does. But I guess it was probably hard for him to do it at all. Did he say anything except for that?"

"Basically, just that he was mad about being scored on so much, and that he still doesn't think it's fair, even though he knows it's the school rule. He admitted that he thought that I bought your Firebolt for Quidditch, that I just liked to spend money extravagantly to show off that I had it. But he said he

changed his mind after the battle, that he understood what it was for, and that you and Ron were very important to that. And that the battle kind of put the Quidditch thing in perspective for him. That was pretty much it, I think. I was checking him, he was sincere."

"Well, that was good of him," said Hermione, seemingly hoping to encourage Ginny to accept the apology as Harry had.

"Would've been better if he'd made sure he talked to both of us, but yes, I suppose so," she said grudgingly.

"By the way, Neville's not here because he just got called by Professor McGonagall," said Hermione.

"I know, I passed him on the way, he was following the cat," said Harry. "I looked at him, and he just did this," he added, imitating Neville's shrug.

"I think I know why she called him," said Hermione excitedly. "She has to appoint another Head Boy, I think she's considering him."

"She waited the week out of respect for Ernie, I take it," said Ron.

Hermione nodded. "I assume so. But I hope Neville gets it, that would be so great."

Harry agreed, as Ginny asked, "By the way, did the Slytherin second years ever get punished for joining the battle?"

"Well, I know that McGonagall gave them all a ten-minute lecture on how irresponsible and dangerous it was, how the fact that Fawkes was willing to take them didn't make it all right, and so on," said Harry, having heard about it from

Hedrick. "She told them that if it was up to her, they'd get a month's worth of detentions, but that it was up to Snape."

"And what'd he do?" asked Ginny.

Harry smiled. "He gave them one detention each."

The others were amazed. "Boy, he sure showed them," joked Ron. "They ought to kiss your feet for giving him his other half back."

"I can do without the feet-kissing, but yes, I think that had something to do with it," said Harry. "I didn't ask him about it, but he talked to them a little during the detention. He said that what they did 'was not a very Slytherin thing to do,' but that they had the right idea. They told me that their impression was that he was easy on them because they were trying to help me, and because they were doing something to fight Voldemort, which Snape really approves of."

"Wow," marveled Ron.

"I think that about sums it up," agreed Hermione.

They got down to their homework, until Neville arrived twenty minutes later. In response to Hermione's inquiring glance, he said, "She called me in to tell me that she seriously considered me for Head Boy," shaking his head in wonder at the thought. "She said she felt I deserved it, and some other nice things. But she decided to give it to Justin. She said he was a very good candidate too, and that since the job came open because of Ernie's death, she wanted to keep it in Hufflepuff."

"I can see that," said Hermione reluctantly, "especially since Hufflepuff lost two seventh years, Ernie and Jonathan. It's been a pretty hard week for the other three. Justin never

cared about being Head Boy, but I have a feeling he'll take it seriously because he's taking over for his friend. But you did deserve it, Neville. I'm sorry you didn't get it."

"Well, I feel like it was an honor just to be considered for it," said Neville, "and to have her say the things she did. I was really proud, and I know Gran would have been too."

"She was proud of you for who you were, not what you did," said Harry.

"After she died, yes," agreed Neville. "This has been a year of 'almosts' for me, I was thinking on the way back here. Almost made Head Boy, almost chosen by a phoenix... come on, you know I'm not complaining," he protested to Hermione's wounded look. "It was just an interesting coincidence."

"You know I still feel kind of bad about that, that she chose me and not you," said Hermione sadly.

"I wish you wouldn't, and yes, I know you can't," said Neville. To the others, he added, "We've had this conversation ten times, or variations of it. She still feels bad, and nothing I can say can change that."

"Well, Neville, there's another way to look at the 'almost' thing, if it makes you feel any better," said Ron. "Almost killed, almost had a huge rift in your relationship..."

"Almost lost my head and tried to torture someone into insanity," Neville added thoughtfully, keeping his voice down. "Good point, sometimes it's better if the almosts don't happen."

And I almost got Voldemort, thought Harry, though he knew better than to say it out loud. It would seem too self-pitying,

and he didn't want the others to feel they should have to reassure him that he'd done enough. When Voldemort is no longer a threat, he thought, then I'll have done enough. I don't care if it's just him alone, or him with Lucius Malfoy, or him with an army. I have to find him, I have to get him. And I will.

One of the consequences of the battle was that killed or captured Dark wizards left behind many brooms on the battlefield, including twenty-eight Firebolts. Since both Aurors and Hogwarts students had fought in the battle, Kingsley suggested that they divide them equally, but McGonagall declined, citing the Aurors' greater need for them. Kingsley agreed to take twenty-two, increasing the Aurors' total of Firebolts to forty, which was enough for eight more Aurors than they currently had. McGonagall kept the other six, and two weeks after the battle, arranged to trade two of them for eighteen used Nimbus 2001's. To Snape's outrage, she then distributed six each to the Heads of House of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff, along with one Firebolt to each House. Starting next year, she announced, each team would use six Nimbus 2001's and one Firebolt, and private brooms would no longer be allowed. At the same time, she said, the brooms were not to be used at all until the next year, as some matches had already been played under the old system, and that it wasn't appropriate to change the rules in mid-season.

Two weeks after the attack on Hogwarts, the forty-five captured in the attack were executed. At Harry's urging, and, Harry assumed, Madeline's, Bright did not review all of the condemned with Legilimens himself, but he did do a third of them, most of them from America or Australia. He reported to Harry that, disturbingly, some of these people had never killed, and had been convicted of non-violent crimes such as theft. With more qualms than before, Bright

allowed the executions to proceed, since these people could be broken out as well. Harry pointed out that Voldemort could simply start breaking people out of other countries' wizarding prisons, and they would be forced to capture and kill them, too. Bright said he felt it was unlikely, and that the same reasoning that applied to killing the other ones applied to this situation as well. Harry again considered speaking out against it, and again decided not to. Bright assured Harry that all had willingly allied themselves with Voldemort, and that tipped the balance for Harry against opposing it.

At the end of February, Harry conducted his semi-monthly energy-of-love testing. To his delight, though not his surprise, Hedrick reached 100, as did Augustina. Eight students in all developed the ability to use the energy of love, six of them Hufflepuffs: two third year girls, two fifth year girls, and Justin and Susan. Harry was very pleased; not as many were getting it as he would have liked, but when he recalled that before the year began he had worried that few or no students would learn it, eleven seemed like a lot. The younger Hufflepuffs' success in particular spurred more interest in study groups.

March was a very quiet month, both at Hogwarts and in the wizarding world in general. There were no more Death Eater attacks; except for the battle, Death Eaters had caused no deaths in the new year so far. In mid-March, the Prophet ran an article suggesting that Voldemort was, for all practical purposes, defeated, and it contained quotes from an anonymous Ministry source supporting the notion. True to his word, Bright identified the source (using Legilimens, Harry was sure), and made it clear that his career would take a dramatic turn for the worse if he ever again did anything similar. The next day's main article emphasized the Ministry's, and the Aurors', continuing determination to

track down and eliminate Voldemort. Still, the wizarding world was starting to relax. In a way, Harry was glad that people were no longer terrified, but hoped that their vigilance and support for the effort to get rid of Voldemort wouldn't wane. Dentus had told him that many people's memories were short; Harry hoped they weren't that short.

In the evening of the fourth Monday of March, Harry and the other five were sitting on the conjured carpet in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Ron and Neville were talking about their private Potions classes with Snape, which had been joined from the beginning by Justin, Susan, and Terry, all of whom had to persuade Snape that they wanted to become Aurors. The conversation turned to the topic of them becoming Aurors.

"So, do you think all five of us will manage it?" Ron asked Neville.

"I don't see why not," said Neville. "Everyone seems serious about it, and not just because they volunteered to take Potions from Snape. It would be good if we all make it; within three years we'd be back up to thirty-seven, assuming no one retires. Thirty-eight, if Harry joins. Still no idea yet, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "For some reason, I'd rather put it off as long as possible. I'm not sure anything has changed in how I look at it; I sort of wish I could do both."

"Well, you know you can be a part-time Auror if you stay on at Hogwarts," said Neville. "But I guess you mean you wish you could do both full-time. I thought maybe the eight 100's last month might have pushed you a bit more to stay."

"Pansy's mostly responsible for four of the eleven we've had so far," pointed out Harry. "I could go be an Auror, she could

stay and teach special classes on the energy of love."

"First of all, it's more you than me, and you know it, so don't argue with me," Pansy said, mock-sternly. "We don't know how good I'd be at teaching it to people who didn't have a lot of affection for me already. And secondly, I already have other career plans anyway."

"Really? What?" asked Harry.

"Did I never tell you?" she asked, surprised. "I think everyone else already knows. I decided early this year that I want to be a Healer. After Hogwarts, I'm going to take the graduate course they offer at St. Mungo's; it takes three years. Professor McGonagall told me that she talked to Healer Haspberg, and she's sure I can get into the course. Healer Haspberg said she'd be interested to see how the energy of love would work when applied to Healing."

"Wow... no, I had no idea," said Harry, slightly embarrassed that the others had known, but not him. "That sounds great."

"Yes, it's a really good idea," agreed Ginny.

Pansy chuckled. "I know why you think that." To Harry, she explained, "The first time I told her, she said it was good, because if any of your children had problems, she could just go straight to me."

"Yes, I've already explained why it would be good for her to specialize in Healing children," said Ginny helpfully.

"She means, of course, that I should specialize in Healing Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley's children," said Pansy, with a smile at Ginny. "I already told her, it's not as though I wouldn't do that anyway. Your children are never going to suffer from a lack of being looked after, I'm very sure."

"Not with Mum around," said Ginny. "She'd be going crazy just hearing us talk about this. I can only imagine what she's going to be like when she has an actual grandchild."

"It'll be something to see," agreed Ron.

Neville tilted his head. "Did you hear something?"

"No, what?" asked Hermione.

"I don't know, just a little noise." Neville shrugged. "Maybe I imagined it."

"So, Neville," asked a smiling Ginny, "What do you two think, about kids?"

Neville and Hermione looked at each other. "We are interested in having them," said Neville, "but there are practical issues. We're both going to have careers, so we would have to work that out. I'm sure Hermione's parents would like to look after children sometimes, but they both have careers too."

"I'm sure you both know, Mum would love to," Ginny assured them. "Even though they wouldn't exactly be her grandchildren, she..."

Ginny trailed off as something small and brown dashed between her and Pansy, stopping in the center of the circle formed by the six of them. As it nervously darted its head from side to side, Harry saw that it was an old-looking, beaten-up brown rat, with a tattered left ear... and a silver right front paw.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 22, Three By Three: To his friends' great dismay, Harry feels compelled to take up Voldemort's challenge of a final showdown on terms that appear highly favorable to Voldemort.

From Chapter 22: "I would think even you would agree that he has earned the right to make this decision," argued Snape.

"When he's taking risks that are mainly his, yes," said Bright. "But the people—"

"The people are who he has put himself on the line to save, time and time again!" shouted Snape. "The ones who fight, who suffer, who put themselves at risk, they are the ones with the right to choose! The people you represent are the ones who go about living their daily lives, with only a tiny risk of anything happening to them. The way in which you most represent the people of which you speak is that you are the only one in this room who has not actively fought the Dark Lord! Do not speak to me of 'the people!'"

There was a silence, as Snape and Bright looked daggers at each other.

22. Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Three By Three

Harry felt a chill go through him. What is he doing here? he asked himself. He just walks, well, scurries in here and offers himself up? Whatever this is, it can't be good.

"What? What is it?" asked Neville, responding to the others' shocked looks.

Harry realized that Neville couldn't see the silver paw from where he was sitting. "It's Pettigrew." Deciding it was better to be safe than sorry, Harry immediately conjured a small cage with four sides and a top but no bottom around Pettigrew. The rat ran up to the side of the cage and tried to squeeze through the bars, but they were too close together. Then, trying to take advantage of the thickness of the carpet, he tried to burrow underneath the bottom of one of the sides, nudging the cage up with his nose. Harry put a stop to that by conjuring a large stone on top of the cage. The cage sank into the carpet and nipped the rat's nose; he squealed and retreated to the center of the cage.

"Was that necessary, Harry?" asked Hermione. "He came in here on his own, after all—"

"And I want to make sure he doesn't change his mind and leave on his own," responded Harry abruptly. "It's pretty easy for a rat to get away, we saw that four years ago." He regarded the rat for a few seconds, then looked at Hermione; he sent that he wanted her to ask Flora to bring McGonagall, and that he intended to ask Fawkes to bring Snape. She

nodded, and within seconds, McGonagall and Snape were there.

They looked at Harry quizzically for a second, then looked at the cage; Harry moved the stone off the top so they could see better. McGonagall's eyes went wide as she recognized the rat; Snape's reaction was a smirk. "He just showed up, ran onto the carpet," Harry informed them. "I put the cage there just to be safe."

Snape let out a dark-sounding chuckle. "Though I did not bother to predict this, it was utterly predictable. Once again, he seeks the protection of the side which seems to have the upper hand."

"But why would he come?" asked Pansy. "He must know they're executing Death Eaters."

"He clearly believes," replied Snape, "that Professor Potter will protect him. He has betrayed the Dark Lord, and has useful information which could lead to his final defeat. He wishes to trade that information for his liberty, and protection from the fate he so richly deserves."

"Are you using Legilimens on him? Is that how you know that?" asked Ron.

Snape shook his head. "One cannot gather useful information by performing Legilimens on someone in animal form. I have simply stated what is obvious."

"But he has nothing to bargain with," pointed out Ron. "You, or Harry, or Hermione could just take the information from him. I assume you will."

"Naturally," agreed Snape, his dislike and contempt for Pettigrew clear every time he glanced at the cage. "But he

knows that Professor Potter is a person of honor, and Pettigrew's presence is his side of an implicit bargain. He does not think that Professor Potter will take the information and allow him to be executed, though I hope to persuade the professor that it would not be such a bad, or dishonorable, thing."

Harry stared at the cage. He recalled that the person inside it had been the direct cause of his parents' deaths. Pettigrew had as good as killed Sirius, framing him for murder and causing him to spend twelve years locked up for a crime he didn't commit. And he had been instrumental in bringing Voldemort back, making him indirectly responsible for all the deaths Voldemort or Death Eaters had caused since Voldemort's return. Harry started to find Snape's suggestion somewhat appealing.

He didn't want to commit himself. "Let's not worry about that yet, let's just figure out why he's here." He waved his wand, and both of the room's doors slammed shut. Looking at the cage, he said, "I'm going to get rid of the cage. When I do that, you become human, okay?"

The rat seemed to react with panic, scrambling around the walls of the cage. Annoyed, Harry said, "We're not going to get very far if we can't communicate with you. All right, we'll do this anyway. Professor Snape, I assume you know the spell that forces him into human form?"

Snape nodded. "As soon as he starts changing, withdraw the cage." Snape pointed his wand at the now-frantic rat, and the instant the rat started changing, the cage flew off to one side. Within a few seconds he was Peter Pettigrew... and as soon as he was, he started screaming, clearly in horrible pain.

Harry's friends drew back, startled. "Harry, stop!" shouted Hermione, apparently assuming that Harry was using the Imperius Charm.

"I'm not doing anything!" he shouted back, hoping to be heard over Pettigrew's screaming.

McGonagall waved her wand, and Pettigrew transformed back into a rat. Snape shot her a glance that suggested his unhappiness with what she had done. Harry placed the cage back over the rat.

"What was that all about?" asked a stunned Ron. "You'd think someone was doing the Cruciatus Curse on him."

"I cast Legilimens as soon as he transformed," said Snape. "It was not long enough to get much information, but I was able to determine the source of his discomfort." Harry raised his eyebrows at Snape's use of the word; Snape's indifference to Pettigrew's agony reminded Harry of the 'old' Snape. I guess, thought Harry, at least this means I did the reverse Cleansing properly, he obviously still has his dark side.

"Before he left the Dark Lord, the Dark Lord placed a spell on him to prevent him from doing what he is now doing. The spell is meant to cause him intense pain should he even contemplate seeking out Professor Potter, never mind actually doing so. When he is in the form of a rat, however, the spell is ineffective. He has traveled here as a rat, and any return to human form will cause the sort of reaction we just witnessed."

Pretty nasty, thought Harry, but typical of Voldemort. It did seem, however, to raise more questions than it answered. Ron asked one. "Wouldn't Voldemort know that, though? That it wouldn't work on him in his rat form?"

"One would think so," agreed Snape, "which leads me to believe there is at least a reasonable possibility, if not a strong one, that the Dark Lord intended for Pettigrew to do as he has done. Otherwise, why let him live?"

"Maybe he put the spell on Pettigrew a long time ago, soon after he came back, so Pettigrew wouldn't even think of betraying him to me," suggested Harry.

"It is possible," agreed Snape. "Needless to say, we must know more."

"But we can't do Legilimens on him for minutes while he screams and screams," said Hermione, appearing concerned for Pettigrew despite herself.

"Of course, we would Silence him first, and bind him with ropes," said Snape casually. "And before you look at me like that, Mr. Longbottom, remember what he has done."

"It's more the way you say it, like you'd enjoy watching him suffer," responded Neville, giving Snape a wary look, as if wondering how much he could get away with.

"Professor Potter does not seem unduly disturbed at the prospect," noted Snape.

Staring at the rat, Harry nodded. "No, I'm not. He'd have to suffer like that for weeks before he'd suffer a tenth of the misery he's caused. But we won't do that unless we have to. Professor, has he been Cleansed?" Snape nodded. "Okay, then this is what we do. Make him human again; I'll use the Imperius Charm on him. It'll take him fifteen or twenty seconds to go unconscious, and then we can use Legilimens to find out what he knows. Can more than one of us do Legilimens at once?"

"Only one can manipulate the memories," explained Snape. "Others may view the same memories, but not control them. I will be the one to search, of course."

"All right," agreed Harry. "But just be sure to get his last meeting with Voldemort. And don't forget to..." He trailed off as Snape communicated his annoyance without words. "Sorry. Didn't mean to be a backseat driver."

Snape didn't bother to conceal his irritation. "The headmaster found such Muggle idioms to be quaint. Unsurprisingly, I do not. Professors, are you ready?"

Harry and Hermione nodded, and Snape forced Pettigrew to become human again as Harry yanked the cage away. Harry used the Imperius Charm immediately, and Pettigrew's screaming grew even more intense, now that he was in two kinds of pain. Harry focused on keeping the Imperius Charm going, and finally Pettigrew went unconscious. Snape cast Legilimens, then nodded to Harry and Hermione that they could do so as well.

It took a long time, over a half hour, for Snape to view all the memories he thought worth viewing. As they watched, Harry realized that Snape had definitely been the best one to do it; as he had with Harry, Snape effortlessly went from memory to memory, all of them significant to what they were looking for. At one point, Pettigrew started to stir, and Harry had to use the Charm on him again.

"I believe that is all that is necessary for now," Snape eventually said, putting down his wand. McGonagall waved hers, and Pettigrew became a rat again; she then placed the cage Harry had conjured over him again.

"That's quite a story," remarked Harry, amazed at what he had seen. "Now, the question is, who else do we tell?"

"Mr. Shacklebolt, definitely," said Snape. "And the Minister will have to know sooner or later; perhaps it is better that he know now. I cannot think of anyone else with an immediate need to know. Perhaps the two of you would summon them with your phoenixes."

Harry nodded at Hermione, sending to Fawkes that he wanted him to appear near Bright, suggesting he check Bright's home first, then the Ministry. Ten seconds later, Kingsley appeared with Flora; soon thereafter, Fawkes carried Bright into the room. "That was interesting; I've never been summoned in quite that way before," commented Bright, amused. Suddenly turning serious, he asked, "What's going on?"

Everyone had stood while the phoenixes were gone, and Harry had added a bottom to the cage and moved it to the top of a desk. McGonagall gestured to it and said, "Kingsley, Minister... this is Peter Pettigrew."

The two exchanged a startled look, and as one, bent for a closer look at the cage. "Ah, yes, the silver paw," said an impressed Kingsley. "But why is he in the form of a rat?"

Harry explained what had happened before they had arrived, then looked at Snape. "Professor, do you want to tell the story?" He Vanished the carpet, and formed a circle of ten desks. Snape began speaking as they sat.

"I should begin by reminding everyone present that what follows is what Pettigrew knows, or thinks he knows; it is not necessarily the truth.

"Most of the important information is based on a conversation he overheard between the Dark Lord and Lucius Malfoy the day he left. Just before this conversation, the Dark Lord dismissed Pettigrew from his service, saying

that he had no further use for him. Pettigrew made halfhearted protestations of his fealty and continuing desire to serve, but both he and the Dark Lord knew he was not being truthful. The Dark Lord told him he did not care what Pettigrew did from that point, and that Pettigrew's final reward for his assistance in bringing the Dark Lord back was that, having outlived his usefulness, he would be allowed to live. As the meeting ended, the Dark Lord ordered him to fetch Malfoy into his presence, then cast the spell whose effects we have observed.

"Pettigrew did as he was ordered, but instead of leaving, transformed into a rat and headed back to where the Dark Lord was talking to Malfoy. I will pause in the narrative to point out that this is the crux of whether the information that follows is genuine or not. Would the Dark Lord be so careless as to allow himself to be overheard? Or did he know that Pettigrew would attempt to return to Professor Potter, despite the spell, and stage the conversation so as to be overheard, and plant misinformation? My personal opinion is that it is likely that the conversation was staged, but nonetheless provided true information. I will elaborate on this later.

"The conversation between the Dark Lord and Malfoy was fairly lengthy, and concerned the Dark Lord's long-term plans. The Dark Lord admitted to Malfoy that he thought it possible that Professor Potter could disable or even defeat him; though he expressed contempt at the professor's inability to kill, he appeared to be even more afraid of what the professor might do to him than he would be of dying. 'He means to inflict upon me a living death,' were the Dark Lord's exact words, and that is no doubt how he sees it. They discussed the reports of the change in my behavior, and agreed that Professor Potter had managed to reverse the

Cleansing, something which neither would have believed possible.

"The Dark Lord then expressed concern about his future prospects. I pause in the narrative again to say that this is an exceptional conversation for the Dark Lord; it is not like him at all to admit any weakness. His admissions lend verisimilitude to the conversation, but again, we cannot know his intentions. To continue, he said to Malfoy: 'He will not give up, Lucius. I saw this in his mind. I could hide and never be heard from again, and still he would seek me out. Due to that cursed prophecy, he believes that it is his destiny.'" Harry saw his friends looking at him with sympathy, trying to understand the burden he had carried for so long.

"The Dark Lord then explained to Malfoy his plan, which he had been working on in secret for the past month. He said that he had created a Ring of Reduction with a number of highly unusual characteristics; for one, this Ring would be three by three, with a total of nine rooms. This was believed to be impossible, but he has done it; Pettigrew later, as he was leaving, found the Ring and confirmed this.

"The Dark Lord told Malfoy that he would hide in the Ring itself, using a magical form of suspended animation. This was also not known to be possible, but I do not doubt the Dark Lord's ability to accomplish such a thing. He will inhabit the ninth room of the Ring, after having set obstacles in the other eight rooms which he felt would surely eliminate anyone who managed to gain entry. He intends to stay there for two hundred years."

The others wore expressions of awe. "Why two hundred years?" asked Ron.

Harry answered. "He would be long forgotten by then... but more importantly, I would be long dead. If it is true that I'm the only one that can beat him-and since no one else can do the Imperius Charm, that may be the case-then he would come out in two hundred years, and there would be no one capable of beating him. His reputation wouldn't be damaged like it is now; he could start over, be more careful, and probably succeed. He couldn't kill me, but he can avoid me. It makes sense. Whether they let Pettigrew hear that part or not, I'm inclined to believe it's true."

"So that's it then, we're rid of him," said Ron, his tone suggesting he dared not believe it. "If what Pettigrew heard is true, he's gone, he won't be a threat in our lifetime."

"And what about the people two hundred years from now?" challenged Harry.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about that anyway, is there?" asked Ron. "You can't get into one of those things unless you're a close family member, and he doesn't have any of those. No one can get in."

Looking around, Harry saw that Hermione was looking down, her expression one of sadness. He saw that McGonagall and Snape knew, too, but no one else did. Snape explained it to Ron. "No, Mr. Weasley, he has no family members. But remember, the blood connection is what is necessary. Having the same blood as the person in question will do nicely."

Realization dawned on the faces of the others, and tears started to come to Ginny's eyes. "Oh, no," she gasped, starting to cry. "You can't, you can't, you can't..."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I have to."

"No, you don't!" she yelled. "He's gone, you can have that normal life you've always wanted! We can have children, they can grow up knowing their father..." The tears stopped her from speaking further; she struggled to stop them.

He took a deep breath. "And what about the people two hundred years from now? He'll come out, they won't know him, they won't be able to stop him--"

"Who knows what might happen then? I don't care about the people two hundred years from now, I care about now! You risked enough, you've done enough..."

"I have to do this," he said. "I have to get him."

"Why, because it's your destiny?" she asked bitterly.

"No. Because I'm the only one who can."

"What if you can't?" she asked desperately. "What if you go in there and get killed? Who knows what he's put in there?"

"I was going to mention, Harry, that it will be very dangerous, probably more dangerous than anything you have ever faced," said McGonagall solemnly. "He will be able to manipulate the rooms in more ways than is usual, set up conditions and environments of his exact choosing. It would not take me long to think of ways to set up rooms that even you could not get past."

"I've always been able to come up with stuff when I've had to," said Harry stubbornly. "I'll do what I have to."

"Excuse me for interrupting," said Bright, "but Harry, I think we should seriously consider the question of whether you should go at all. And not just from the standpoint of your safety, which I care about as well, but of society's. If we let

him stay in that box, we're safe, we're rid of him. But he could have it set up that if anyone goes in there and dies, the... suspended animation ends early, and he comes back out. You'd be gone, and if you're the only one that can beat him, we'd be in big trouble. You could be putting our whole society at risk. And Ginny's right, we don't know what will happen in two hundred years. Maybe by then the energy of love will be truly widespread, and they could fight him better. Maybe you're just the only one of *this* generation who can beat him. Maybe the prophecy didn't consider this question."

"The most recent prophecy," said Snape, "said that the course the headmaster took when he sacrificed himself was the one and only way to defeat the Dark Lord. I do not believe it meant, only within a certain time frame."

"So, you think he should go," said Kingsley.

"Yes, but my opinion is irrelevant," said Snape, with a small shrug. "The fact is, he will go. I have seen his most important memories, from his perspective. I know him better than any of you, perhaps even you, Miss Weasley. He will go; it would be utterly counter to his character to do anything else. And, Miss Weasley..." Looking at Snape, Harry was amazed to see what he was sure was compassion in Snape's eyes. "He *will* come back."

"I will," Harry affirmed, taking her hand. "I'm sure of it."

"You can't know that," she said, still very emotional. "I'll tell you what, if you're so sure, take me with you. You can take one person. Take me."

Having already thought about it, he sighed. "You're the one I want to take with me. Please believe that. But I should take

the person whose coming along makes it most likely that I'll come back."

"If you're so sure that you'll make it, it shouldn't matter who you take with you," she challenged him, but he could see in her eyes that she knew she wouldn't win the argument.

"I am sure, but what I just said is the smart thing to do, the best thing to do."

"I should be the one to accompany you, Professor," said Snape firmly. "My extensive knowledge of Dark magic would be extremely helpful."

"Yes, it would," agreed Harry, "but the problem is, the best person to go is someone with an extensive knowledge of magic, and the ability to use the energy of love. Somehow, I think that's going to be very important."

"Well, I think we all know who he just described," said Ron, looking at Hermione.

She met Neville's gaze. "Neville, if he asked you to go, you would. So, please don't tell me I shouldn't."

Neville slowly nodded. "I know, I would. It's just harder to accept when it's the person you love than when it's you." He looked back and forth at Harry and Hermione and said, "You had already decided this, hadn't you. When you were viewing the memory."

"It was more that we knew than that we decided," said Hermione. "We both knew that he would go, and that I was the person to go with him. We only checked through the phoenixes to make sure, but we both knew."

"I say again, nothing is decided," put in Bright. "Let's not go charging ahead deciding who's doing what. Speaking as the representative of the people, the people deserve a voice in this. You're making decisions that have a far greater effect than yourselves if you're unsuccessful."

Snape gave Bright a disdainful look. "He has risked himself many times to fight the Dark Lord. He has always been the one to make the decision. How is this any different?"

"Because in this case," countered Bright, "there is an alternative to fighting, one where we can live in peace. Before, he was never putting our long-term safety at risk. Here, he might be."

"I would think even you would agree that he has earned the right to make this decision," argued Snape.

"When he's taking risks that are mainly his, yes," said Bright. "But the people—"

"The people are who he has put himself on the line to save, time and time again!" shouted Snape. "The ones who fight, who suffer, who put themselves at risk, they are the ones with the right to choose! The people you represent are the ones who go about living their daily lives, with only a tiny risk of anything happening to them. The way in which you most represent the people of which you speak is that you are the only one in this room who has not actively fought the Dark Lord! Do not speak to me of 'the people!'"

There was a silence, as Snape and Bright looked daggers at each other. "Professor," said Harry quietly, "he did take a risk just by—"

"Thank you, Harry, but I can defend myself," said Bright curtly. Glaring at Snape, he said, "I know what you've done,

Professor—"

"You know nothing of what I've done," spat Snape contemptuously

"I know far more than you think," responded Bright confidently. Harry saw Snape's hand subtly reach for his wand, and he wondered if Snape planned on using it, but his hand just rested on it. "You who fight Voldemort may do it for revenge, to protect all people, to protect your loved ones, or just because it's the right thing to do. But whatever your motivation, what you do affects society. Society honors those who do, like Harry and his friends, as they would you if they knew what you have done. If you don't do it for the sake of society, fine. But you cannot decide that you are answerable to no one, no matter how many risks you've taken, or burdens you've carried.

"And Harry, while that wasn't directed at you, it applies to you as well. As I said before, this isn't just about you. You seem to have decided, but I say again, it isn't only your decision to make. I would just ask you to think about it dispassionately."

Harry found that he tended to agree with Snape, that this decision shouldn't be made on the basis of politics or popularity, even given that there was indeed a risk to everyone. "Whether I'm dispassionate or not, there's still the question of those people two hundred years from now," he said, voice slightly raised in annoyance at Bright's attitude, which was exactly what he'd come to expect of a politician. "He's still threatening people, it's just not us anymore. So, we should just let him go? Did he just become 'someone else's problem?'"

Bright managed not to look at Kingsley, though Harry was sure that Bright knew where Harry had heard the phrase. "It's not that simple, Harry," responded Bright, his expression unreadable. "Nor was it when I said that before."

Harry didn't accept that; to him, this was a simple question of right and wrong. Referring to Kingsley but not wanting to use his name, Harry retorted, "He said that you didn't mean it the way it sounded. But right now, it sounds a whole lot like that. I know this isn't going to mean anything to you, but this is just the right thing to do. I mean, it's really obvious, it isn't even close. People are at risk, it's just different people now. If my fighting him was the right thing to do up until now, it's the right thing to do now."

There was a silence; Bright met Harry's gaze, but said nothing. "We may be getting too far ahead of ourselves, in any case," suggested McGonagall, clearly trying to calm things down. "None of this is certain, except that he saw a three-by-three Ring. Did Pettigrew overhear its eventual resting place?"

Harry nodded. "Greenland, was all he heard. It should be easy enough to find, with magic-detection equipment. But, Professor Snape, do you think it's possible that he just neglected to consider that I'd be able to get in?"

"Of course not," said Snape. "He knows you can, and that you will. I do not doubt that he has set up the first eight rooms with the most dangerous possible spells and circumstances that he can think of, and that he is confident that you will not break through them. Otherwise, he would not do this."

"But you think I should go anyway. Why?"

Snape managed to look like he was smiling without actually doing so. "Because he has consistently underestimated you. I believe he has done so again, one last time."

"You wouldn't say that if you loved him," said Ginny angrily.

Snape sighed lightly. "I cannot speak to that. But I do know that the headmaster, who we all agree loved him greatly, would have respected his right to do as he wished. 'We must all make our own decisions,' he would have said," he added wryly, with a glance at McGonagall. Ginny put her head in her hands, which Harry interpreted as an admission of defeat.

"Did you learn anything else of interest from Pettigrew?" asked McGonagall.

"A few things, none of great interest," replied Snape. "Malfoy was to travel to Greenland with the Dark Lord, and assist him in setting up the Ring. There was a vague reference to plans Malfoy had after that, but nothing clear.

"As for Pettigrew, the thought never occurred to him that the conversation may have been staged for his benefit. He tells himself that he does this because he owes Professor Potter a debt for saving him from Lupin and Black, but it is truly because he expects Professor Potter to value this information enough to intercede with the Ministry to spare his life, allowing him to live out his life without fear of being hunted down one day. In addition, he hopes that Professor Potter will be willing to reverse his Cleansing, as he did mine."

Ron let out a cross between a grunt and a chuckle. "I hope you don't do that," he said to Harry. "Get him pardoned, okay, but make him live out his life Cleansed. That'd be punishment enough, for what he's done."

"As much as I agree with the sentiment, Mr. Weasley," said Snape, "letting him be free but Cleansed is not an option. The temptation to commit acts of violence would be too great."

"The Ministry will decide what to do with him," said Bright. "We will take into account the fact that he came here voluntarily, even if it was with selfish motives. When criminals turn themselves in, it is rarely out of remorse or altruism. Kingsley, I assume you will be putting together an expedition to Greenland tomorrow?"

Kingsley nodded. "With magic sensors, of course. It might take a day or two, but if it's there, we'll find it."

"Then I suggest," said Bright pointedly, "that we take this one step at a time. Let's make sure it's even there before considering the next step. Harry, if you would ask Fawkes to return me, I'd appreciate it. And Kingsley, would you take him into custody?"

"I never thought I'd be taking a rat into custody," muttered Kingsley.

"Thank you, Harry," said Bright, as Fawkes hovered above his head. The others left, and it was just the six of them again.

Harry moved the desks and re-conjured the carpet, and they sat down. As they did, Ginny hugged Harry from a sitting position, clinging to him. "Sometimes, I sit there in class, and think, how did I get so lucky to have you for a life partner. And then something like this happens, and I remember the price I pay for it. I knew this, Harry, I knew this when I fell in love with you. You had already been risking yourself in ways that would drive a partner crazy with worry before you fell in love with me. But like I've said

before, and it's still true... knowing that doesn't make it any easier."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just can't live with the idea that he'll come out in two hundred years and terrorize the people then, and I didn't stop him now when I had the chance. But there is something I'll promise you." He broke off the hug and looked into her eyes, his face very close to hers. "You can go out the front entrance of the first room, as well as the last. We'll always be able to go back, and we'll always be able to see what's in the next room. If there's something we can't do, we'll go back. I don't intend to run into a room if I don't know how I'm going to get past it."

"Well, that's something, at least," she said. She kissed him, and put her arms around him, resuming the hug. "I do believe in you, you know. I don't mean I don't think you can do it. It's just that... it's taking all my effort right now not to go on pleading with you not to do it. You know how that is, how it would be if it were me. But Snape is right, and I know it. This is who you are. It's just so ironic, part of what makes you so attractive is the same thing that feels like it could rip my heart apart-how brave you are, how you always want to do the right thing. I know this isn't easy for you. It just isn't easy for me, either."

"No, it's harder for you," said Neville, prompting Hermione to take his hand. "I think Harry knows that."

"I do," said Harry, continuing to hold Ginny. "We'll get through it."

Two days later, Kingsley contacted Harry to tell him that the Aurors had found the Ring. They couldn't yet confirm that Voldemort was inside, but they planned to set up some relays, which would tell them within twelve hours. Harry

asked why one relay wouldn't tell them; Kingsley explained that there had to be at least twelve of them in proximity to each other for them to work, which Harry hadn't known. "Otherwise, we could've flown around on brooms with relays, and found him that way," pointed out Kingsley. Harry hadn't thought of that, either.

When Harry entered the staff room with Hermione on Thursday, Dentus had a message for him and McGonagall, who was also there. "I got a fireplace call from Bright just now, before lunch. He said to tell you two that he was giving an interview to the Prophet today, and that 'the whole story' would be in tomorrow's Prophet. Of course, I have no idea what he's talking about, but he said you would."

Angry, Harry looked at McGonagall. "He's making it public? Is that really a good idea?"

"I can understand your annoyance, but it is really not a security matter anymore," she explained. "This is perfectly consistent with his feeling that the matter deserves a public airing. It is simply that, as Minister, he is in a position to give it one. Letting you know was clearly a matter of courtesy, so you would not feel as though he were doing something underhanded."

McGonagall explained the situation to the other teachers, who listened raptly. "And you're going?" asked Sprout fearfully.

"Yes, I am." To the silence, he added, "Well, I should be able to do this; I am the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, after all."

"Yes, I'm sure Lockhart would have been able to," said McGonagall dryly.

"I must say, Harry," said a concerned Sprout, "your humor usually isn't quite this... morbid."

"I do expect to come back, you know," he said. "I wouldn't be taking Hermione with me if I didn't."

"It does not surprise me that the Minister has done this," said Snape disdainfully. "He is simply covering himself politically."

Harry glanced at Dentus inquiringly. "Professor Snape's interpretation of the Minister's action is perhaps cynical, but probably not wrong," said Dentus. "If he authorized your doing this without making it known first, he would be responsible for what happened if things went badly. By doing this, he can allow public opinion to form, which he can then react to. If people support the idea, he can do so with little risk. If they oppose it, he'll probably do so as well."

"I'm going to do it anyway, whether he approves or not," said Harry. "I'm pretty sure he knows that." Harry knew that Snape and Dentus would understand that he was referring to Bright's Legilimency.

"That may be, but if you do it over his opposition, and you get killed and Voldemort returns, he won't be blamed," explained Dentus.

Even though he was somewhat knowledgeable about politics by then, Harry was still a little stunned. "If that happens, we have much bigger problems than who gets blamed."

"Of course, that's true," agreed Dentus. "It's really a political reflex."

"Yes, cowardice is a well-known political reflex," said Snape scornfully.

"Isn't it possible that it's what he said, that he just thinks the public deserves to have a say in what happens?" asked Harry. "I didn't get the sense that he was lying."

Snape smirked. "Legilimency does not tell you when people are fooling themselves; you must make that determination yourself. I had thought you had lost enough of your naivete to not ask that question."

"Apparently not," said Harry. "I do like him, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Snape, his tone making his opinion clear. "Keep in mind, though, that he will always look out for himself first."

"I guess that would be a political reflex too," mused Harry. He glanced at Dentus, who nodded. He can do whatever he wants, thought Harry. It doesn't make any difference to me.

After Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class, Harry sat down with Snape to talk about what specific traps Snape thought he might find. Snape had a few ideas, but admitted that for the most part, Voldemort was likely to be highly inventive, and to use artifacts. Snape explained that some artifacts could be incorporated into a Ring, and reminded Harry that Voldemort had, at the time Snape's spying had been exposed, been in the process of acquiring an artifact that he felt sure would eliminate Harry. Snape was sure that Harry would encounter this artifact, but again, didn't seem especially worried.

Harry was curious, and asked, "Why are you so sure that nothing's going to happen to me? I mean... to be honest, even though I say that, I think it's more because I won't

consider the alternative than because I'm a hundred percent sure. But you seem sure."

"As I said the other night, it is because of what I have seen in your mind. There is something... different about you. You react instinctively in dangerous situations, and never wrongly. You have survived so much that it is difficult to believe that something will defeat you."

"But there have been times when I didn't do it myself," Harry pointed out. "You've saved me before, and the others all have at one time or another, too."

"And that will be Professor Granger's job," said Snape reasonably. "Or, to put it another way, her job will be... to think."

"As long as someone is. You know, I'm sorry, I know you would have preferred to come along. I would've picked you if I couldn't have her for some reason."

Snape nodded at the compliment. "Your reason is valid enough. I still feel I would be of more use, but I agree that the chances of my returning are less than hers. That would not disturb me, of course, but it would greatly disturb you, and your mental state is a very important element in this."

Harry had no particular answer to the comment, and after a short pause, remembered something from Monday night. "When you were arguing with Bright, I saw your hand move to your wand. Were you thinking of attacking him?"

The corner of Snape's mouth curled up. "The idea would have had a certain appeal, but no. He had tapped me." To Harry's puzzled look, Snape explained, "When two people are Legilimens, and each knows that the other is, there is something they do occasionally to exchange information. He

used Legilimency to 'tap' me, to cause a certain mental sensation." Snape demonstrated as he spoke, and Harry did indeed feel as if someone were tapping him, in his mind rather than on his shoulder. "It was an offer to show me a memory as we spoke. I touched my wand in order to view the memory. In this case, the memory was information he found when he viewed the memories of some Death Eaters before their executions. There was, for example, Avery's memory of my returning to the Death Eaters three years ago, and what happened then. This was when he said he knew far more than I thought; he assumed, correctly, that I did not know that he had viewed the memories of the Death Eaters as he had. I would not have guessed he had the stomach for it. He did not know much of what I have done, but he knew more than I thought. It is still irrelevant, though; he should not be telling you what to do."

Harry more or less felt the same way, but Bright had touched a nerve with the 'responsible to no one' comment. He had never thought of himself as especially responsible to the Ministry, particularly after the vendetta it had waged against him in his fifth year at Hogwarts. He supposed he felt responsible to Dumbledore first, then McGonagall. Did he have a responsibility to the Ministry? He wasn't sure, and found that he didn't want to think about it.

Harry arrived for breakfast a little late on Friday. Knowing she would have already read the Prophet, he asked Hermione, "So, how bad is it?"

"It could be worse," she said. "He doesn't give an opinion about whether you should go or not. All he says about that is 'we're studying it,' which I've learned is politician-speak for 'I want more information about public opinion before I take a position.'"

"That's good. After the way he was on Monday night, I was afraid he'd be negative about it, and push public opinion that way," said Harry.

Surprised, Ron asked, "Since when do you care about public opinion?"

"Good question," Harry admitted. "I guess I'd feel better about doing it if I knew that people supported it. Maybe I'm used to having public support, and it would be strange not having it. I'm not sure."

"Just to warn you, Harry, you might not get it, or not nearly as much as you're used to," said Hermione. "Everything you've done up until now has had the effect of protecting the community, of helping or rallying the community. What we're going to do doesn't help this community at all, and causes some amount of risk. You're now doing it for the community that's going to exist two hundred years from now, and they don't have any representatives here. There could be a lot of people who think, 'why not leave well enough alone, who knows what'll happen in two hundred years.'"

"Now you're making me feel bad for saying that," said Ginny.

"I wasn't--"

"I know you weren't, and I know you'll say, I have a better reason than anyone to feel that way. But Harry's right, it's just wrong to say to those people, too bad, you're on your own. As it is now, Harry's going to be the most famous wizard of his generation. Wouldn't it be ironic if a generation that read about him in history books ended up getting wiped out because he didn't care enough to take a risk to help them."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "'Tragic' seems more like the right word, but I see what you mean. But I wondered, Harry, couldn't you just wait to do it? He's not going anywhere, you could do it forty years from now, and it would be the same as doing it now."

"I did think of that," he said, with an uneasy glance at Ginny, who had thought of it as well. "The problem is, theoretically, I could die any time. I know it's really unlikely, considering what I've survived, but you never know. And if I die unexpectedly, that's that for those future people. But also, I don't want it hanging over my head for forty years. I want to get it over with." The explanation had not gone over especially well with Ginny; she could understand it, but had felt it was a very small risk, compared to the certainty of a life together.

"Can I see your paper, Hermione?" Harry asked. She handed it to him, and he scanned the front page. The main article, the one in which the whole situation was explained based on the interview with Bright, was the article at the top of page one. The article that focused on Harry, written by Hugo and based on the interview he had conducted with Harry the day before, was off to one side, starting just above halfway up the front page. Good, he thought, at least they didn't bury it. Harry wanted people to know why he wanted to do it, since he didn't expect Bright to touch on the subject much in his interview.

"Are you a lot calmer about this whole thing," Neville asked Ginny, "or am I just imagining it?"

Ginny nodded. "Don't get me wrong, I'd try to talk him out of it if I could. I'm still selfish enough to not want him to do it. But I've accepted that I can't talk him out of it, that like I said, this is just who he is. So, I've decided to join him in his

state of denial about the danger. He's convinced that nothing's going to happen to him, so I'll be convinced too. I don't know if I could get by otherwise."

"Whatever works," Neville half-joked. "I can definitely understand it."

Harry still didn't feel that it was denial, so much as a reasonable expectation based on his experience. He didn't see the point of entertaining other possibilities.

* * * * *

"WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE TWO HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW?"

Public Opinion Divided On Question Of Potter's Final Confrontation With Voldemort

(Hogwarts/April 22) Hugo Brantell, Daily Prophet

Three weeks after the Ring of Reduction containing the evil Dark wizard Voldemort was located in Greenland by Aurors, public opinion is still very divided on the question of whether Hogwarts professor Harry Potter should be given permission to enter the Ring in an effort to defeat Voldemort once and for all.

As Prophet readers know, Professor Potter strongly wishes to enter the Ring, accompanied by friend and fellow Hogwarts professor Hermione Granger. The most controversial aspect of his motivation is a prophecy given seventeen years ago which states that a certain person, understood now to refer to Professor Potter, would be 'the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord,' suggesting that Professor Potter alone is capable of doing so. Supporting the idea is the fact that Voldemort is known to be highly vulnerable to the Imperius

Charm, which Professor Potter remains the only wizard capable of performing.

Those who oppose the idea point out that Voldemort is safely out of the way, and will likely remain so for a very long time if the Ring is undisturbed. They fear that if Professor Potter attempts to capture Voldemort and fails, Voldemort could return earlier than planned, threatening the lives of the population in a way that will not occur if Professor Potter does not make the attempt.

At the center of the debate is a question which is very much a matter of judgment, and cannot be decided objectively: what risks are we willing to take for the sake of future generations? Clearly, Professors Potter and Granger are the ones most at risk; it is agreed by experts that Voldemort will have set up highly dangerous obstacles for Professor Potter, which even the energy of love may not be able to defeat. But, of course, the two professors would not be the only ones at risk.

The man who will ultimately make the decision, Minister of Magic Rudolphus Bright, has been guarded in his public comments on the matter. (Minister Bright declined a request for an interview for this article.) Ministry sources familiar with Bright's thinking say that he is genuinely conflicted; they say he has great confidence in and regard for Professor Potter, but is very concerned about the risk to the population should he and Professor Granger fail.

Professor Potter, on the other hand, is anything but conflicted; he is utterly certain that there is no alternative but to make the attempt. He firmly believes that the prophecy is correct, and that his not making the attempt is tantamount to abandoning the citizens two hundred years from now to the same fate which he has been attempting to

prevent befalling the citizens of the present day. He recognizes the potential danger to the current population, but feels it is a risk worth taking.

Ministry of Magic Undersecretary Roger Trent, the only high-ranking Ministry official to speak publicly against Professor Potter's plans, feels that Professor Potter is being too 'cavalier' in dismissing the danger to the population. "He has taken staggering risks on behalf of the wizarding population, which we recognize and appreciate," said Trent recently, in an interview conducted through an intermediary. "But I fear he has taken this to the level of a personal vendetta. Voldemort killed his parents, and others close to him. It must seem to him that Voldemort has slipped away unpunished, and I very much understand why he will stop at nothing to gain revenge. But the fact that he is willing to take substantial risks does not mean that he should subject the population involuntarily to those risks. If he has done what he has done for the people, then he and the Minister should listen to those people now. If he has done it for the reasons I fear he has, he should stop and seriously reflect on the possible consequences of his actions."

Trent dismissed the idea that leaving Voldemort where he is could condemn a generation to a difficult struggle and likely defeat. "Two hundred years gives us plenty of time to prepare," said Trent. "Already, over a dozen Hogwarts students have the ability to use the Killing Curse shield; I strongly suspect it will be commonplace in two hundred years. Further advancements in magic may be made by that time, and we can pass down detailed information to future generations, so they can be ready. We may even find a way to destroy or transport the Ring; there are all kinds of possibilities. In his desire for retribution, Harry wants to rush ahead along the riskiest path. I am confident that Minister Bright will have the proper perspective, and act prudently."

In an interview for this article, Professor Granger vigorously denied that Professor Potter's motivation was revenge. "That's ridiculous, as anyone who knows Harry well would understand. He just doesn't work that way. In any case, he wouldn't be able to use the energy of love if he were motivated by revenge; if you asked any of the people Harry's successfully taught, they would tell you the same thing. As for being prepared in the future, that would be nice, and I would hope they would be. But if I've learned anything from my History of Magic classes, it's that political leaders are far more responsive to political opportunism than to the lessons of history. I find it very likely that in two hundred years, Voldemort would be little more than a legend, and warnings handed down from this time would not be taken seriously. More importantly, it would be morally wrong to pass a burden to future generations that we could take care of now, that we have the best chance of dealing with now. Undersecretary Trent is trying to appeal to people's selfish impulses; Harry and I hope that this generation will take the security of their grandchildren's grandchildren as seriously as they take their own."

Interviews with random citizens suggest that most have not deeply thought through the arguments for either side. Those who oppose Professor Potter's plans make various arguments against them, but are largely motivated by fear of Voldemort, and a feeling of 'we should leave well enough alone.' Those who support the action Professor Potter wishes to take do so mostly based on their trust in him; a very representative attitude was voiced by a woman who said, "Look what he's accomplished, think of where we'd be without him. He's earned our trust, and should do what he thinks is best."

The Ministry has given no timetable regarding when a decision on the matter might be forthcoming. Professor

Potter is known to wish to make the attempt as soon as possible, but as a Ministry source recently said, "[The Ministry is] in no hurry to make any kind of decision. Without any sense of urgency pressing against them, they'll put it off for years if they can, I suspect. Politicians hate to take risks, and no matter what regard one may have for Professor Potter, this would undeniably be a risk." The people must now decide whether they agree with Professor Potter that it is a risk worth taking.

* * * * *

The following Saturday, Harry walked out of the castle entrance with the other six members of the Quidditch team for their second match of the season, against Slytherin. Glancing at the rest of the team as they walked, it occurred to Harry for the first time as a conscious thought that aside from him, the team consisted of three brother-sister combinations: two Weasleys, two Creeveys, and two Keplers. Funny how I never noticed that before, Harry thought. Snape would get a chuckle out of it, that I'm not very observant.

"So, Ron," said Dennis, "can you tell me what position I'll be playing today? Beater, maybe?" Harry grinned at Dennis's humorous way of complaining about being made to play Keeper in the last match, having had almost no experience at the position.

"Actually, I was going to tell you this in the changing room, but since you asked now, I might as well tell you," said Ron earnestly. "We're going to do this thing where, to keep the opposition off balance, we change positions every fifteen minutes. I've got it all written down. You'll start out at Seeker, then go to Chaser... hang on, let me get the timetable, I have it all worked out..." Harry and Ginny laughed as Ron pretended to search the pockets of his robes.

"Don't do that again, Dennis," said a relieved-looking Eric. "I thought he was serious." Eric's older sister Lydia joined Harry and Ginny in their laughter.

Grinning now, Ron said, "Well, if I thought it would help..."

"I feel like I should practice at all positions, just in case," said Dennis. Ron had announced at the last practice that the starting lineups would be the same as last time, but Harry and Andrea would switch positions if Gryffindor got out to a big lead, or if Ron determined that he and Ginny scored enough on the Firebolts that Harry could be spared to Seek. Harry didn't assume that would happen, though, considering that Slytherin's brooms were excellent, though they weren't Firebolts. Gryffindor's broom advantage would be nowhere near as pronounced as it had been against Ravenclaw.

They changed and walked out to the stadium. Ravenclaw would play Hufflepuff first, so the Gryffindors would be on the sidelines, watching the match. For the first time in over a year, there would be no Auror patrol over the stadium; with the Death Eaters decimated and Voldemort in a Ring of Reduction, there was little reason to think that security would be a problem.

Standing on Harry's left, Ginny leaned toward Harry and spoke quietly, so only he could hear. "I kind of feel bad for the Slytherins," she said with amusement. "They have to play against their idol."

Not wanting to disappoint her, he frowned at her choice of words. "They did promise me they'd do their best," he said, recalling that he'd been surprised to discover that they were so intimidated at the thought of playing against him.

"I'm sure they will," she said, as Madam Hooch blew the whistle to start the match. "Anyway, it should be interesting

to see how Michael does today. He's not up against three Firebolts, so he won't have an excuse if he does poorly today."

Remembering that Hufflepuff had a strong offense last year, and that none of their Chasers had graduated, Harry felt that Corner would have his hands full anyway, and he was right. Thirty minutes into the match, Hufflepuff got the Snitch and the victory, by a score of two hundred ninety to one hundred thirty. Corner didn't look like a good Keeper, thought Harry, but at least he didn't look totally outclassed as he had in the first match.

After the Star of the Match interview, Harry and his teammates walked onto the pitch. Some of the Slytherins nodded at him; a few were looking in other directions. Harry wondered if they'd be intimidated by Ron, too, since Ron had worked with all of them on their flying. Speaking quietly, Harry said to Ron, "At least, this'll be the first time we've played Slytherin where we don't have to worry about them doing something underhanded." Ron chuckled and nodded in agreement.

"Captains, shake hands," said Madam Hooch, and Ron and Hedrick exchanged a friendly handshake. She blew the whistle, and the players shot off the ground.

"And they're off, Ginny grabs the Quaffle and heads at top speed to the Slytherin hoops," announced Colin, speaking quickly. "Septus is ready, Ginny sh- no, fakes! Septus goes for the fake just for a half-second, but it's enough, and Ginny shoots past him for the goal, as Gryffindor takes the early lead. Slytherin with the Quaffle, Flatt passes out to Danforth, back to Flatt, who speeds ahead, Ron on him. Flatt continues on into the scoring area, shoots and misses! I don't know

whether Dennis would have been able to reach it if it had been good, but it was just wide of the left hoop.

"Dennis passes out to Potter, who passes downfield to Ron as Lydia bats away a Clark Bludger. Ron to Ginny, Flatt covering Ginny, passes to Ron, who shoots, saved by Septus! Nice save there, as Septus passes out to Cook. Cook sends it ahead to Flatt, who speeds ahead, spots a Potter steal attempt at the last second and swerves away, but doesn't see Ginny coming from the other side! She bats it out of his hands, scooped up by Potter, as all three Gryffindor Chasers fly down the pitch, ahead of their Slytherin counterparts."

Harry sped past midfield, thinking about whether he would take the shot himself or pass off to Ron or Ginny. They had decided not to do the blind passing this time, as Slytherin's brooms were not that far in speed from a Firebolt, so they couldn't take it for granted that the target of the pass would always be open. He looked behind him, but didn't see Ron, and Ginny wasn't in a good position to be passed to. Deciding to take the shot himself, he turned his head to look ahead again, just in time to see the Bludger approaching his head at high speed.

Harry slowly opened his eyes, and saw Ginny and a woman in green robes walking toward him; he realized after a second that it was Healer Haspberg. As he glanced around the room, he realized that he was in a private recovery room at St. Mungo's, and that he had a splitting headache. Ginny took his left hand and kissed the back of it. "Oh, thank goodness," she said fervently. "They thought you'd be okay, but I wasn't assuming anything until you woke up. How do you feel?"

"I have an awful headache," he said, as he started to remember how he'd ended up there. "Funny, when I realized where I was, the first thing I thought was, Voldemort again? It's such a reflex, if something happened to me."

"I can understand that, but you'd better not say that to Helen," advised Ginny. "She's just been beside herself, she was terrified that she'd killed you, or permanently injured you. She was just bawling, she was apologizing to me. I've been really worried too, of course, but I didn't want her to feel like that. I told her that if Voldemort hasn't managed to kill you, a Bludger isn't going to do it."

"It almost did," said Haspberg, her expression grave. "It hit you in the forehead... well, you can see it," she added, handing him a hand mirror; he held it up to see a large bump on the left side of his forehead, a half-inch below his hairline. "You didn't get the full impact. If it had hit you in the center of the forehead, you could very easily have died. That has happened in Quidditch before."

Harry raised his eyebrows at how close it had been. "You should send to Hermione that you're okay, she can start telling people," suggested Ginny. "Everyone's really worried."

"She already knows," said Harry, getting an impression from Hermione as he spoke. "She asked Flora to let her know as soon as I woke up. She's in the Great Hall with a bunch of people; she just sent me an image of it." He asked her nonverbally if Helen was in the Hall, and got back a negative answer. Harry made a request of Fawkes, who appeared in a few seconds, Helen in tow.

"Professor!" Helen nearly screamed, and rushed to his bedside. With only a little difficulty, Harry sat up and put his

arms around her. She started to sob into his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry..."

Harry shook his head and patted her back. "No, it was my fault," he said, feeling bad for her suffering. "I wasn't looking well enough. I don't have much experience at Chaser-no, it's true," he added, as she shook her head as she cried. "You have to look out for Bludgers, know where the Beaters are and what they're doing. I've heard that a lot of Chasers have to get clobbered at least once for that to really sink in. As a Seeker, I was usually far enough from the main action that I didn't have to worry about it so much. And Ravenclaw's Beaters weren't very good, so I didn't think about it much last time. But it's not your fault. You did what you were supposed to do. The whole point is to make Chasers hesitate when approaching the hoops."

Helen had stopped crying, and was now sniffing. "I was trying to miss, I really was," she said, obviously desperate for Harry to believe her, though it would never have occurred to him that she would try to hit him in the head. "I was nervous about the match because I knew I'd have to hit Bludgers at you, and I didn't want to. This is like, the worst thing that could have happened."

"I'm sorry," he said again, holding her a little more tightly. "It really wasn't your fault, it really wasn't. And I'm going to be all right."

Helen let go of Harry and turned to Healer Haspberg, looking for confirmation. Haspberg nodded. "We'll do some tests to make sure, but it looks that way. We'll have him do some spells as a test, to help us make sure." She turned and left the room.

Having a sudden idea about doing his own test, Harry reflected that Hermione wouldn't approve, but quickly decided he didn't care. He reached for his wand and cast the Imperius Charm on Helen, giving her no instructions, but reinforcing the idea that it wasn't her fault, that sometimes things just happened.

Helen's face lit up. "Oh, wow... this is amazing!"

"So I hear," said Harry wryly. "I suppose if I can do that, I must be all right. I'm going to withdraw the spell now, okay?"

"Just a little bit longer?" she asked, still looking blissfully happy.

I'm beginning to see why Hermione said I shouldn't do this for people's enjoyment, thought Harry. "Okay, just another half minute," he conceded, still feeling bad for her. Turning to Ginny, he asked, "Why am I here, by the way? Why not the infirmary?"

"Ron and I both dove for you, and Ron got to you first, and levitated you," Ginny explained. "Then he held you over his shoulder, and Fawkes appeared. Ron grabbed his tail, and expected to be taken to the infirmary, but Fawkes took you here instead. Seems like a good idea, to go to the place with the best facilities."

"Well, phoenixes know best," said Harry, only half-joking. "Okay, Helen, I really need to stop that now, all right?"

"Okay," she conceded, with obvious regret. Harry withdrew the spell, and Helen shook her head in amazement. "That was so incredible. I know what Hermione said about not doing it for fun, and I guess she's right. I would've had you

do that for an hour, or longer, if you'd agreed. I guess the only reason you did it at all was that I felt so bad."

"You don't feel bad anymore?" asked Ginny.

"No, I still do, but that really distracted me," said Helen. "It's also that he's going to be okay, of course. But if I think about it, I feel bad again."

"Then stop thinking about it," said Harry, with a tone that humorously suggested that he was speaking as a teacher. "I was serious, it really was my fault. What happened with the match, by the way?"

Helen and Ginny exchanged a look of mild annoyance that such a thing could be considered. "We weren't exactly thinking about that," responded Ginny. "Madam Hooch tried to tell us to play on after Ron came back, which was a few minutes after he took you. Everyone was asking Ron about how you were doing, but he didn't know; they didn't tell him anything right away, they probably didn't know. We were all still really worried, so playing was really out of the question."

"I was crying so much, I couldn't have played even if I'd wanted to, even if they started the match again," added Helen. Feeling bad for her again, Harry reached over and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Anyway," continued Ginny, "Ron and Hedrick talked, and agreed that there was no way we were going to continue the match. They walked over to Madam Hooch and told her that they weren't going to continue, and whatever happened from that point was up to her. Then Colin asked Ron to fly over to where he was, obviously not for the Star of the Match interview, but just to tell people what he knew. He told them what they told him at St. Mungo's, and that because of the phoenixes, Hermione would be the first one to know

anything. So, Hermione's had a crowd around her ever since then."

Harry nodded, lost in thought. After a short silence, he said, "I just had... a strange thought, but it really made sense. I feel like this was a message from... fate, or whatever, that I need to get into the Ring and get that over with, not let Bright or whoever else put me off anymore."

Reluctantly, Ginny nodded. "I couldn't help but remember that argument we had the day after Pettigrew came back, when I tried to get you to put it off for thirty or forty years. This just shows that you were right. You could've been killed, and then those people in the future would've been in trouble."

"I thought of that too," added Helen, holding onto Harry a little more tightly. "Just you getting killed would be horrible, but thinking about that, too... it was so awful, I'm just so glad you're all right..."

"I'm all right," he assured her. It may have been close, he added silently, but I'm all right.

Harry walked into Dentus's quarters shortly after breakfast the next morning. "How are you feeling?" asked Dentus. "I'm sorry, I know you must be getting asked that by every person you haven't seen since the match, but still..."

"Not that bad," answered Harry as they sat. "Healer Haspberg wanted me to spend the night at St. Mungo's, but really, when you get down to it, it's just a bump on the head."

"Most bumps don't knock people unconscious," pointed out Dentus. "But I know you'll tend to understate such things, so

when you say 'bump,' I understand you mean 'concussion.' By the way, how was the match decided?"

Harry rolled his eyes briefly in annoyance at Madam Hooch. "She called it a Gryffindor win, by the score of ten to nothing, which was the score when I got hit. Apparently there's no provision in the rules for what happens if both teams simultaneously decide not to play any more, so she used the rule for what happens if the stadium is destroyed in some natural disaster, which is the closest thing she could find. It just seems to me to be common sense to reschedule the match, but she says once it's started, there has to be some result. I really don't like winning like that, though."

"Understandable," agreed Dentus. "So, what did you want to talk about? Not that you have to have a reason to come here."

Harry nodded. "I guess most of the time I can say what I want in the staff room. I'm getting sick of waiting, Archibald. I want to get the Ring over with. You knew that already, of course, but what happened yesterday..."

"Seemed to give it a new sense of urgency, I would imagine," agreed Dentus. "I can very much understand that. Unfortunately, what happened yesterday doesn't change the political situation."

"I know. By the way, I meant to ask you in the staff room, but I never did... what's going on with Trent, with all that crap about revenge? Who does he think he is, acting like he knows what I'm thinking?"

"He doesn't, of course," said Dentus. "I'm sure I told you a long time ago that in politics, how something looks is often more important than how it is. To someone who doesn't know you, but knows your history, revenge would seem like

a very understandable motive for your actions. That's what Trent is playing on. I've explained this sort of political act before: when politicians want to make a case, they put it together in such a way that it appears that it is, or could be, true. Whether it actually is true is irrelevant from their point of view; all they care about is that it can't be directly disproved. What Hermione said in the article was as an effective a refutation as could be given, but he would just say, 'she's his friend, what do you expect her to say?' Anyone who knows you knows that she's right, but he's speaking to those who don't know you, and are nervous about their safety.

"Now, the next question is, why is he doing this," continued Dentus, as Harry nodded. "It's another kind of political game, the kind that gives politicians a bad name. He sees an opportunity; there's a position that no one has staked out, so he is. His game is: suppose you go into the Ring, with Bright's permission, and fail. You die, and Voldemort comes back. Since he will have been the only one to prominently oppose it, people will remember that he was right. That wouldn't make him Minister, by any stretch, though it would increase his influence. But if Bright started taking on water politically for whatever reason—which, of course, Trent would be doing everything possible to assist—Trent could become the logical alternative. Of course, as you've said before, if you fail there are much bigger things to worry about. But it would take a long time for Voldemort to recruit enough to become a true threat again, and Trent would be aiming to be Minister before then.

"There is a risk to him in this: if you defeat Voldemort, Bright having given you permission, then Bright is golden, and Trent's ambitions are dashed, probably for the next ten years at least. But he figures that since in that situation Bright is golden anyway, so if he's damaged a little, it's not so

important. No one would be taking the position from Bright for a long time. Also, he can just say that he was being prudent, looking out for people's interests. The key for Trent in this is that since you'd be going into the Ring to save future people—people who have no constituency now—there's no one to punish him politically for disregarding their interests. That's what gives his current position such little risk. If he's wrong, people will forget it fairly quickly. But if Bright's wrong, people will remember it. So, all in all: relatively low risk for Trent, relatively high return if he's right. The only unknown is what the likelihood of your succeeding is."

Harry was silent for a half a minute, letting it all roll around in his mind; he knew that without Dentus's tutoring over the past year, he wouldn't have even understood what Dentus had just said. Still... Finally, he shook his head, and said, "Archibald, do you mind if I use your bathroom? I really feel like I need to throw up."

Dentus nodded understandingly. "I know what you mean. Even for politics, this is pretty craven. Hugo understood this, of course, which is why he wrote the article the way he did."

"What do you mean, 'the way he did?'" wondered Harry.

"I told you last summer that politicians don't want to be interviewed by Hugo, because he'll see their agenda, and make it clear by the way he writes. Hugo made a special point of noting that Trent only agreed to be interviewed 'through an intermediary,' that is, so Hugo couldn't use his ability. By noting that—which Hugo is ethically well within his rights to do—Hugo is basically making it clear that Trent has something he wants to hide. Now, Trent could have done what Bright did, and just declined comment altogether, but he wanted his point of view in that article, so he did it that

way. Another way Hugo made his point was that he let Hermione rebut what Trent said about you, and didn't give Trent a chance to rebut her. Now, someone always has to get the last word; that's unavoidable. By giving it to Hermione, Hugo was making a subtle point. So, if you read between the lines of Hugo's article, he's basically saying the same thing I just explained to you, that Trent is playing a game. Not that many people will understand it properly, of course."

"So, Trent didn't really gain anything by not speaking to Hugo directly, did he?" asked Harry.

"Not really, no."

Despite all he had learned from Dentus, Harry was still incredulous. "So, Hermione and I are going to risk our lives to get rid of Voldemort, and this guy's been spending his time working out a way that he can benefit from it if we die." Dentus nodded. "Well, this says something about how much I've learned from you. Last year, I would've been outraged by this. Now, I'm just disgusted."

"Whereas I, on the other hand, am utterly unsurprised," said Dentus. "If I'm surprised by anything, it's that no one took this position until now. That it took this long, I feel, is an indication of the regard in which you're held in the Ministry, and of your popular support—you haven't been wrong yet, and nobody wants to get on the wrong side of you. People do think you have at least a decent chance of success, since you've done so much already. Many politicians, including Trent, have little or no shame, but I think that many would be ashamed to do what Trent's done. So, that's something."

"You mean, no one wants to make an enemy of me?" asked Harry.

Dentus nodded. "If you succeed, you could do a lot to hurt the career of any politician who opposed you, Trent included."

"When we succeed, the last thing I'm going to do is start sticking daggers in politicians' backs, or having someone do it for me," Harry said emphatically. "I wouldn't lower myself to do that."

"I know that, of course," agreed Dentus. "But the politicians don't, and I'm not going to go announcing it. I'd rather they at least considered the possibility. In fact—and I hope it won't bother you that I've done this, but I didn't think you'd care—I've very subtly let it be known to a few people, who I know will spread the word, that I had something to do with keeping Umbridge out of action. Knowing our relationship, people will assume that it was on your behalf, even if I didn't have your direct consent; they'll assume that I'll do things on your behalf that you might not specifically authorize."

Harry grunted. "Normally, I might be bothered at that idea, but after what you just told me, I'm not sure I care. Just do what you think is best." After a short pause, he added, "Just don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Dentus looked at Harry quizzically. "Harry, the whole point of this is that—" Dentus cut himself off as Harry gave him a small grin. Dentus returned the grin as he said, "Ah, you were kidding. That was very good, it was the first time I couldn't tell."

"It's like the first time Neville kidded Ron and I; we weren't expecting it." Harry paused, then sighed. "This is really depressing. I can only imagine where I'd be without your help. Anyway, the main thing I wanted to talk to you about is getting into that Ring, ideally with Bright's blessing,

sometime before my hair starts to turn gray. Think there's any chance of that?"

"That's the question, isn't it," mused Dentus. "I think that Hugo's article is right, of course, that Bright would put you off as long as it isn't a matter of urgency. The only thing you can do, really, is make it one. I assume, from having heard you talk about this, that you plan on going whether you have permission or not?"

Harry nodded. "I can do it pretty easily, of course. I could use the Imperius Charm on Aurors to help me, but as Neville has pointed out, some would probably risk their careers to help me voluntarily. They think I should be allowed to go. It's funny: part of me wants to ask people like you what they think of my going without permission, but part of me won't, because I'm so sure that it's the right thing to do. I know it seems bad, but I just can't live with not doing anything.

"By the way, I talked with Kingsley last night, and he gave me permission to tell you about a security matter that very few people know about, since it could have some connection to the delay in Bright's decision." He went on to explain the situation regarding the relays to a fascinated Dentus. "So, Kingsley tells me that almost all populated areas are covered by now," concluded Harry. "If I pushed Bright, he'd probably say that while he can't say it publicly, any decision should wait until the country is completely covered. Kingsley thinks that's just an excuse, though, since Voldemort would probably keep a very low profile if I got killed and he got out; there'd be plenty of time to finish covering the country with relays. So, the immediate risk to England if I fail isn't as bad as the public thinks it is, since we don't want to make the relays public even though Voldemort knows about them. Anyway, what do you think I can do to get Bright to make a decision?"

Dentus thought for a minute. "If what you plan on doing was popular, you'd have leverage. Of course, if it was popular, he'd have agreed already. Unfortunately, the only way I can think of to force a decision from him is to let him know that you'll do it anyway. He may have worked that out for himself, but your making it clear will put him on the spot. He could then support you, oppose you, take no action, or publicly oppose you or make no decision but covertly support you. You would, in any case, get your answer. Naturally, you would have to be ready to follow through if he opposed you, which I gather you would do. This is probably the best thing for you to do, if waiting indefinitely is unacceptable to you, which I sense it is."

Harry nodded again. "If I force him to make a decision, what decision do you think he'll make?"

"I'm just not sure," replied Dentus. "If I were advising him politically, I'd tell him to continue to make no decision, but to covertly provide you support. That's the safe thing to do. But you can make an excellent political case for him supporting you. As I said while explaining the Trent situation, if he agrees and you succeed, he'll benefit a lot politically—not so much for saving the future people, ironically, but from the association with you that it'll bring.

"One other thing, Harry... I'd strongly suggest that I be the one to talk to him about this. What you're doing is basically leaning on him, pressuring him to do something he doesn't want to do. I'm referring to making the decision, not necessarily supporting your going into the Ring. It's better if the one who talks to him is someone he can relate to politically, who truly understands the political aspects of what you're asking of him."

"If you think that's best," agreed Harry. "He'd probably know I was ticked off at him anyway." To Dentus's inquiring glance, Harry explained, "This waiting hasn't been easy, especially for Neville and Ginny. I see it in Ginny's eyes sometimes, like she's afraid she hasn't got much more time left with me. I want it to be over for her sake more than mine. It's been a month; he doesn't need that long to decide. He might claim it's because of the relays, but I wouldn't believe him. I just don't think he's stopped to think about what it's like for us."

"If he had, he probably would have at least made a gesture to that effect," agreed Dentus. "Now, there's the question of whether or not he should be given a deadline. I'll get a sense from him of how long he plans to take, but I'd like to know from you how long a wait from this point on you'd consider acceptable."

Harry thought for a minute. "He shouldn't need more than a day or two; it's not like he hasn't had a chance to think about it. But I'll give him two weeks; the relays should be done well before that. You can be a little flexible, but really, it's been too long already."

"I understand," said Dentus. "I won't state a deadline unless I have to; it depends on how accommodating he is. Lastly, exactly how much do you want his support?"

"What I want is the ability to have support when we go in," explained Harry. "I want my friends there, I want Kingsley to be able to give me advice and help without having to break the law to do it. You said Bright could openly support me, or quietly let me do it. If I can have what I want, I don't care whether he publicly supports me or not."

Dentus nodded, as if it had been the answer he expected. "All right, then. I'll make an appointment to talk to him, and

let you know when it's done." Harry thanked him and left. One of these days I'm going to have to do this sort of thing myself, thought Harry, dreading the notion.

A week later, on a Sunday evening, Harry motioned Bright to a seat in his quarters. He felt he should make some small talk just to be sociable, but he didn't really know what to say. He decided to just say what he was thinking. "I assume Archibald told you that I'm not happy about waiting as long as I have."

Bright smiled a little; Harry looked at him quizzically. "Sorry. I couldn't help thinking that even if you're not happy with me, it's refreshing to talk to you. Most people are, to put it mildly, insincere with me, putting on a show of some sort. You just say what you think. If you spent a day in my shoes, you'd appreciate how rare that is.

"And yes, he did tell me. And maybe if I spent a day in your shoes, I'd better appreciate why you aren't happy. Maybe I can't properly identify with how hard waiting is, since you would always rather take action than wait. But Harry, the fact is this is risky. I don't think it's at all unreasonable to make sure that the people get a voice in this, and some time has to go by for them to understand the issue and carefully think about it. That's the way things work, and for a situation like this where there isn't a critical time issue, it's better to take more time."

"Was Hugo's article right, that you would have waited indefinitely if I didn't push you?" Harry decided to check Bright's answer.

Bright gave Harry a half-smile and a glance that informed Harry that Bright knew he was being checked, and didn't particularly blame Harry for doing so. "Not indefinitely, but

obviously, longer than you can live with. Probably another month, at most."

"Well, if you had just said, you'll have a decision within two months—"

"It's very hard for a politician to give himself a deadline, especially for something of this magnitude. Part of me feels that I had every right to take as long as I wanted, but part of me—maybe, the non-political part—feels I owe you an apology. Especially given all you've done, you do deserve not to be kept waiting. To be honest, I was hoping opinion would crystallize one way or the other, making my decision easier, but it's still pretty divided. I had a tiny hope that you would change your mind, but really, I knew you wouldn't."

Harry's eyes narrowed, as if trying to understand a difficult idea. "You really don't see that this is just the right thing to do?"

Bright sighed. "I see why you say that. Strictly from your point of view, I agree. But you and I approach issues in very different ways, which we've discussed before. You represent what's right, what's noble, which in a way makes it hard for me, if I'm any kind of decent person, to sit here and tell you things you don't want to hear. It's like the weak part of a person's conscience trying to persuade the strong part not to do something that's noble and right, but risky. Some people will back out if they think about it enough, let their fears get the best of them.

"Now, I don't represent just the weak parts, but I do represent the whole thing. I have to at least listen to the voice that says, 'don't do it, we could all get killed.' You, as the strong part of the conscience, look at that with disdain. Understandable, but that's also the self-preservation

instinct, and it's a very important instinct. It also deserves to be listened to, even if it's not noble. Does that make any sense to you?"

Harry thought for a half a minute. "I understand it intellectually, I guess you could say, but it's hard for me to identify with. I just want to look at that other part and say, how can you abandon those future people? Would you abandon them if they were your children? Is it easier that they're seven or eight generations away, does it make you feel more distance from them? I'd really like to know how someone who would do that can look in the mirror."

"People manage, Harry," said Bright softly. "You'd be surprised. There are many cowards in the world. They find justifications, they tell themselves the kind of thing Trent's been saying.

Bright paused, then continued. "Now, I wouldn't say this to most people, but I know you respect honesty, so I will. I'm rather unhappy that you're so determined to do this that you'll take the choice out of my hands. Not because of ego, but I do think the law should be respected. You know that there are laws that say that the Minister's word is law when it comes to important security matters. Do you really think that you're above the law?"

Harry didn't like it being put that way, which he was sure Bright knew. "I have to admit that I don't have a lot of respect for the law, because I've seen it abused so much since I came to Hogwarts. Fudge threw an innocent Hagrid into Azkaban with no evidence, probably on the authority of the law you just mentioned. But no, I don't think I'm above the law. I can see the reason for the law, and it makes sense, so I should follow it. But in this case, I just couldn't. Those people two hundred years from now... that would weigh on

me, every day of my life. Especially after that Bludger, it's more obvious than ever. Even if you forbade it and I didn't do it for that reason, I would still feel that I should have stopped what would happen, that I was responsible for it."

"Even if society told you not to do it?"

Harry shrugged a little. "I suppose I wouldn't have much respect for a society that decided that Voldemort was now... someone else's problem. By the way, that reminds me, I felt bad for saying that before. I want you to look at the memory of when Kingsley told me that."

Bright did, and nodded. "You wanted to make sure I knew that he meant no offense to me. I understand your loyalty to him... but you may not quite know the extent of his, to you. A few days after Pettigrew came back, I asked Kingsley for his reassurance that if I decided to forbid you from doing this, that he and the Aurors wouldn't help you, and would try to stop you if I asked them to. He said he and they would do as I asked." Bright paused, then continued. "It was the first time he ever lied to me."

Harry was gratified, but he could understand why it upset Bright. "He respects you, Rudolphus."

Bright gave Harry a small nod that suggested that he wasn't reassured. "Maybe, but he respects you more than he does me. It's understandable, and very... human. He would disobey me with regret, not contempt, and... I'm sure you know that the law doesn't apply to Aurors in the same way it does to everyone else, but defying the Minister would be a career-ender. That's how much he respects you. It wouldn't be to save the people two hundred years from now, it would be for you. I'll admit I was also unhappy with that, even though I understand it."

"I suppose I can understand why," Harry admitted.

"There's one more question I'd like you to think about, Harry. You've said that Dumbledore was always talking about how people needed to make their own decisions. If he were here today, would he say this was your decision to make, or society's?"

Harry's eyebrows went up; he hadn't thought of it that way. "I don't know."

"I think you suspect he might say the latter," suggested Bright. Harry knew Bright could be right, but he also knew it wouldn't change his decision. It occurred to Harry that it was interesting that he could easily contemplate making a decision different from what Dumbledore would do. He supposed it meant that he had internalized the idea that he should make his own decisions, not just those he thought Dumbledore would make.

"At the very least, he would have tried hard to persuade society to support the right decision," replied Harry. "And he would have asked the same question that I keep asking, but no one seems to be willing to answer—"

"What about the people two hundred years from now," interrupted Bright. "Yes, If the prophecy is right, they're in serious trouble, maybe done for. I don't dispute that. But he's chosen to fight you on his terms. He has the upper hand."

Harry wasn't even sure why at first, but he smiled. Bright lifted an eyebrow as Harry said, "No, he doesn't. Did you wonder, Rudolphus, why he didn't just kill Pettigrew and go off to Greenland without making sure I knew where to find him? He could have just come out in two hundred years, and

we'd have never known where he was. He wouldn't have had to worry about me. Why did he make sure I found out?"

Bright understood. "Because he had to beat you."

Harry nodded. "His ego demands it, he can't deal with it otherwise. This is his best shot at beating me, but he shouldn't even try at all. Two hundred years from now should be no different from now, to him. He has to beat me, that's his weakness. He'll do the best he can, but he has no escape now. If I get to the ninth room, he's trapped, it's over. He obviously doesn't think I can do it, but like Professor Snape said, he's constantly underestimated me. I'm sure he's done it again."

"And what makes you so sure?" pressed Bright.

"Partly just a feeling, partly the prophecy... but mostly, I've come up with something every time I've had to. I have no idea how or why it happens, but it has, every time. That and the energy of love have to be the reasons for the prophecy. That's what'll get me through this."

Bright stared at him with concern. "Harry, thinking you're charmed could be a dangerous business."

Harry stared back calmly. "So was fighting Voldemort."

"Hard to argue with that," Bright muttered. "Well, we could discuss this all day, but there wouldn't be much of a point. I came to let you know that I've decided to give you official permission and publicly support you."

Harry's eyebrows went high; he had expected nothing more than quiet support. "What made you decide to do that?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Bright. "Part of it is what you've done, but when you get right down to it, I believe the prophecies. And going by the prophecies, this is what you were meant to do. My gut feeling is that you're going to succeed."

Harry slowly nodded. "So, politics didn't enter into it?" he asked with a small smile.

Bright smiled in response. "Politics enters into everything, but I know what you mean. But yes, politics affected this much less than most decisions. And though I want you to succeed for all the right reasons, I wouldn't mind seeing Trent taken down a few pegs. Ironically, this is where I benefit by being Minister: I'm not taking nearly as big a chance as he thinks I am, because he doesn't know about the relays. It's still a risk, of course—Voldemort could come up with a solution—just less than it otherwise might be.

"Anyway, it'll be announced in the Prophet sometime this week, and you'll get to go soon after that. You'll hear about it from Kingsley. Obviously, you'll have whatever resources from the Ministry you want, which I'll soon be telling Kingsley as well." He stood, as did Harry. "Good luck," he said simply.

"Thanks," replied Harry. As Bright left, a one-word thought went through Harry's head: *finally*.

After breakfast the next Saturday, Harry went for a fly with Ron and Ginny, coming back into the castle at a little after ten o'clock. A cat met him at the castle entrance, and he followed it to the Great Hall. It was empty, except for a small group near the head of the Gryffindor table, composed of McGonagall, Kingsley, Hermione, Neville, Pansy, and to his surprise, Molly. "Hi, what's going on?" he asked.

Kingsley and McGonagall looked grave. "We are here to tell you that the preparations are almost finished," said McGonagall. "You can go almost any time, as soon as one hour if you wished to."

"One hour?" exclaimed Ginny. "Why so little time?"

"They can go tomorrow, or next week, if they wish," explained McGonagall. "We knew yesterday that things would be ready today. It was our thought that it might be difficult for you two, and them," as she gestured to Hermione and Neville, "to know that you would go the next day. It might be difficult to sleep, and so forth. This gives you the opportunity to not dwell on it, if you choose."

"I think we've all dwelled on it a fair amount, much more than I'd like to," said Harry firmly. "I want to go today, as soon as possible. Hermione?"

She nodded. "I agree, it sounds good. Thank you, Professor, for doing it that way."

McGonagall nodded. "The Aurors have set up a shelter not far from the Ring. They tried to move the Ring, of course, but it cannot be moved. We have set up a few Portkeys, one to here, and one to the Aurors, so people can travel there without Apparating."

"Who will be there, at the site?" asked Hermione.

"That is up to you," said McGonagall. "Of course you will be able to communicate with us after you go in, through Ginny and Neville on your hands; your pendants will not work from within the Ring to the outside. Ginny and Neville will be relaying messages."

"At least that'll give me something to do besides worry my head off," said Ginny. "I think it's safe to say that Neville and I will be looking at our hands the whole time, unless there's a reason not to."

"Understandable," said McGonagall to Ginny sympathetically. "It is fortunate that both of you have such a way to communicate. In any case, if there is anyone whose input you would like available, they should be at the site. Who would you like to be there?"

"Well, them, obviously," said Harry, gesturing to Ron, Neville, Pansy, and Ginny. "And you two, and Professor Snape... I guess Professor Flitwick too, we might need advice about Charms or Rings of Reduction. I can't think of anyone else... Molly, will you want to be there?"

"Of course," she said, looking as though she was trying to keep down her anxiety, and not doing very well.

"Anyone else?" Harry asked Hermione.

"It would be good if a Healer was on call, at least," suggested Hermione. "Healer Haspberg gave us that basic first aid course, but it might be a good idea to have someone ready immediately if something really bad happens." Harry saw Ginny's expression of worry at the very idea.

"I will set up a Portkey at St. Mungo's; I am sure Healer Haspberg will make herself available should the need arise," said McGonagall.

Hermione shook her head. "I can't think of anyone else."

"We will finish getting things set up, and will let you know when you can come to the site," said McGonagall. "We will

give you more information and advice at that time." She and Kingsley stood and headed out of the Hall.

"Thank goodness it's going to be over with soon," said Harry.

"Not all of us feel the same way," said Ginny fearfully. "That denial is starting to wear off, now that it's so close."

"It'll be all right," he assured her. "We'll be fine, we'll make it."

"Could we go outside for a minute?" she asked. He nodded, and they did. They walked to his office, closed the door, and sat down. He saw Ginny's face for the first time since they were in the Great Hall; she looked like she was about to cry. "I didn't want to break down there, with everyone around," she said, starting to sob. "But I can't help it, I'm so worried..."

He held her as she cried into his shoulder, running a hand through her hair. "I'm coming back," he said firmly. "You have to believe that. I wouldn't be going if I didn't think that."

"Yes, you would," she contradicted him, still sobbing. "If your chances were less than even, you'd still go. I know you." She stopped crying for the moment, and raised her head to look at him. "I know you believe that, and I know that if anyone can do this, it's you. It's just that usually when these things happen we don't have warning in advance, I don't have a chance to worry. But when you go in there, it might be the last time I see you."

"It won't, I promise," he assured her. "Remember, we can come back out. If we don't know how to do something, we'll just go back the way we came, and get out."

She looked as though she wanted to say something, but didn't. After a few seconds, she said, "Are you really that sure? You feel completely sure that nothing will happen to you? This is me, Harry. You won't make me worry any more by saying you're not sure, because I'm already worrying massively."

Trying to be as honest as he could, he said, "I know it's not technically impossible that we could get killed," he admitted, feeling as though he didn't want to say even that much. "But I really feel that it's not going to happen. I can't say why, any more than I've already said. It's just a feeling."

She hugged him, clinging to him tightly. "I've always trusted your feelings, I suppose I can do it this time too." They sat in the silence, holding each other.

* * * * *

Harry and Ginny let go of the Portkey, and he looked around to see a room, about the size of a large conference room. The room only had three walls; the empty space where the fourth wall should have been looked out over a bleak snowscape. The room wasn't cold, so Harry assumed there was an invisible shield covering the empty space, protecting them from the weather.

"From the outside, it looks like an ordinary garden shed," said Kingsley, standing behind him. Harry remembered the tents they had stayed in when they had gone to the Quidditch World Cup; obviously this was just a larger version of that. He wondered how they transported it. Kingsley motioned him to a long, narrow table which seated twelve. He said hello to Flitwick as he sat down. Hugo was also there; Harry assumed he had been invited by Kingsley.

"We advise you to follow a certain procedure for communication," began McGonagall. "You should check in before attempting to enter any given room, after you have observed what you can visually. Tell us what you see, and we will tell you what we can, if anything. We are aware, of course, that each room may contain things we did not know were possible for a Ring of Reduction, or perhaps previously unknown magic entirely." Harry saw Ginny wince at the last sentence. "It is then that you will be calling upon your renowned intuition."

Harry wondered if she was being a little sarcastic in using the word 'renowned,' as if she felt that he relied on it too much. "It hasn't failed me yet," he said confidently.

"We'll do that, Professor," said Hermione earnestly. "What else?"

McGonagall gestured to Snape, who said, "I will brief you on the artifacts you will take. Firstly, you will be equipped with clothes which have been enhanced to protect you against most physical damage. Note the use of the word 'most'; you are not advised to march into physical danger relying on the clothes to protect you. They are simply an additional safeguard. Between them and the normal spell that protects against physical damage, you should have adequate protection.

"Next, there is this bracelet," continued Snape. "You, Professor Potter, will wear this. Its function is that it can restore a nearly dead person to total health. But there is an important caveat, so listen carefully. Whether by design or by accident, this bracelet performs its intended function only fifty percent of the time. Once used, it cannot be used again for a year, whether it functions properly or not. My point is that under no circumstances should you do anything

unusually risky with the idea that this will restore you if you are injured. It cannot be relied upon; it is only being provided as a desperation measure. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded. "I have a feeling I won't be needing it anyway. But I assume it could be used for Hermione as well?"

Snape and Hermione spoke at the same time, and Hermione persisted. "No, Harry. It has to be kept for you. And I know what you're going to say, so let's not bother with the argument. You're the one who has to survive. You know that. We can't use it on me, and then be in a position where you need it, but it's used up. Let's move on. Professor Snape?"

Harry said nothing, but fully intended to use it on her whether she liked it or not if the need arose. "Continuing, the next artifact is one you will no doubt find familiar, as you used it to deceive me quite thoroughly four years ago," said Snape reprovingly, as McGonagall handed Harry the Time-Turner. "It has been set to now function in increments of weeks rather than hours, and will hopefully make any use of the bracelet unnecessary. If you should reach a position from which it appears that you can go neither forward nor back, you should use this, turning it six times to go backwards a total of six weeks."

"It'll work inside a Ring of Reduction?" asked Harry, surprised.

McGonagall nodded. "It was tested for this purpose very recently. A volunteer went inside a Ring placed in a remote location and used this, for the purpose of seeing whether it would work in your situation, and it did."

"So, the person had to stay out of sight for six weeks?" asked Harry.

McGonagall smiled wryly. "It had been a little too long since I had a true vacation. I stayed in a secluded beach resort in Malaysia; I read, and spent some time as a cat. I really do not do that often enough; it is very relaxing. Six weeks is the time you must use, because any less time than that risks you simply ending up in the Ring, at an earlier time. If you have to use it, you will end up in this location, outside the Ring. A mile north of here, you will find a blinking light marking a supply of Galleons; you should take them and go someplace you will not be seen, far from England. You may choose the place, so long as you stay out of sight." Harry found himself wondering how Fawkes and Flora would react to the fact that there would be two Harrys and two Hermiones for six weeks; he assumed Fawkes would know enough not to let the Harry at Hogwarts know about the one wherever they ended up hiding, if it came to that. Then he realized that if they left by using the Time-Turner, it must have happened that way, because he would have remembered if it hadn't. He quickly abandoned the whole line of thought—thinking about the ramifications of using the Time-Turner always gave him a headache—and he focused on the conversation instead.

Snape resumed speaking. "Professor Granger has been equipped with a small backpack containing various supplies, including large quantities of food and water which have been magically reduced in size, first aid equipment, two extra wands, and an Invisibility Cloak, should that for some unforeseen reason become useful. Finally, there is the artifact that Professor Granger wears, the one that stops time. This should be used as necessary, and should definitely be used immediately upon entering the Ring. The first room will be the most dangerous, as you will not have an opportunity to examine its contents before entering, as you will with the other rooms. Naturally, you will have to deal with whatever may be within the device's effective

radius, but it will certainly be better to use it than to not use it."

"Do you have any questions or comments?" asked McGonagall, eyeing them both carefully. They shook their heads. "Well, then, you may proceed to the Ring whenever you are ready—"

McGonagall stopped herself as Harry held up a hand in a request for silence. "Just a minute, the phoenixes are trying to tell us something." They materialized and stood on the table, each phoenix in front of its companion. Harry didn't even notice his eyes going wide at the information he was getting, until he happened to see Hermione having the same reaction.

"What?" asked Ginny anxiously. "What is it?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged a worried look before Harry answered. "They told us... well, they sent us that there's something they can do that'll help us. They can't go in with us, of course, but there's something they can do before we go that they think will save our lives. They can't say how, of course, or in what way, it's just something they know. One of those phoenix-intuition things."

"Whatever it is, absolutely, do it," urged Ginny.

"You might not be happy about it," warned Harry.

"I'm very sure I'll like it more than you being dead. What is it?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged another glance, and Hermione explained. "What they're suggesting is something that's only been done once in phoenix history, and it's only possible now because Fawkes and Flora are partners.

Apparently they can... modify us, seems like the best phrase. They can give us the ability that phoenixes have to communicate with each other. What this means is that... right now, Harry and I can communicate as phoenixes do, through Fawkes and Flora. What they're suggesting would allow us to communicate like phoenixes do, directly. And... it would be permanent."

Everyone else except Snape had expressions of great surprise. "And they can't say exactly how this is going to help you?" asked Kingsley. "I mean, it doesn't seem like the kind of thing that would help that much in the situations you'll be in."

"I know, but they're sure," said Hermione.

Harry glanced at Ginny, sitting next to him; she still had an expression of disbelief. He felt vaguely guilty, for more than one reason. He knew she had to feel that fate was playing a particularly cruel trick on her, considering how she felt about the phoenix communication that he and Hermione already did. He also knew that she knew that there was no choice in the matter; if it could save his life, it had to be done. The only alternative was to not go, and that was unacceptable.

He also felt guilty because he knew that Hermione had not lied, but shaded the facts of what would happen. Fawkes and Flora considered it to be like bonding, that in two members of the same species would represent the closest possible relationship, like marriage. The only other humans this had been done with before, even longer ago than the millennia or so Fawkes and Flora had been alive, had been married. Harry and Hermione could send to each other, but their bond would be roughly like Fawkes and Flora's—sometimes they would feel what the other felt even without sending, if

it was strong enough. Harry wondered how he would adapt to such strong intimacy, but he knew there was no other option, so he didn't debate it with himself. He also knew that Hermione had softened her description of what would happen, because she knew that Ginny would have a hard enough time with it.

Looking at Ginny again, Harry could see the anguish on her face, even though she was clearly trying to not let her feelings show. She looked at him, then down for a few seconds. Finally, she looked at Neville, on her other side. "Neville, could I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," said Neville, and they got up from the table and headed to a door at the end of the room that Harry hadn't noticed before. The table remained quiet as Ginny and Neville closed the door to the other room.

Harry wanted to talk to Hermione, but not out loud. Are they trying to decide whether they're okay with us doing this? Harry sent. We have to, they must know that.

Yes, they know, Hermione sent back. You know how this affects Ginny, we both knew when Fawkes and Flora told us about this. Ginny needs time to adjust to it, and she doesn't have that time right now. She needs to know how Neville feels, and talk to him, since he's the only one who can really understand how she feels. He can help her deal with it. And please don't feel guilty about this. You have no choice, we have no choice.

I feel guilty because part of me welcomes this, even though I know how it affects Ginny, he sent. I like doing this with you, it feels good.

There's nothing wrong with that, she sent. If you could do this with her, even though it meant you couldn't with me,

would you?

Yes, he sent back apologetically.

Don't feel bad, she sent. I love you immensely, but I would do this with Neville instead of you if I could, that's the way it should be. As long as you feel that way, you have nothing to feel bad about. Don't use your energy on feeling bad, use it on trying to help her. This is really difficult for her. She doesn't want this to happen, but she knows that we'll die if it doesn't, and that makes her feel bad for not wanting it to happen. You need to tell her that she shouldn't feel bad for not wanting it to happen. Just be patient and tolerant, and make sure she always knows how much you love her.

I'll try, he sent. How do you feel about this?

She sent her feelings, which were similar to his: she enjoyed the communication, the bond with him. Our relationship is what it is, she sent, and it doesn't take away from mine with Neville, or yours with Ginny. It's different, separate. Yes, this makes our relationship very intimate, which is unusual. But it would only be wrong if we were doing this in preference to Neville or Ginny, or to escape from them. That's not the case. This is just something that happened, and your enjoying it is separate from how it affects Ginny. Enjoy it, and do your best to help her.

He sent that he would, and they stopped sending as they waited; Hermione got up and walked around the room a little. After another few minutes, he felt his hand tingle, but was too self-conscious to look at it while sitting at the table. "It's okay, you don't have to look," he heard in his head. "Hermione tells Neville that you feel bad about this. Please don't; it'll only make it worse. I don't blame you. Neville's helped a lot. This is just something I have to adjust to, like

you and I had to adjust to losing our privacy when you started helping Snape. It's not instant, and it may be difficult sometimes, but I think I can do it. Right now, the important thing is that you get through this. We can think about this more after that. I love you, I'm coming back in now."

A few seconds later the door opened, and Ginny and Neville walked back to their seats. Ginny stopped at Harry's seat and put her hands on his shoulders from behind. He took her left hand and kissed the back of it; she patted his shoulder and resumed her seat.

Exchanging a glance, Harry and Hermione walked over to an empty spot and sat on the floor facing each other, legs crossed, knees almost touching. Following the phoenixes' instructions, they reached out and took both of each others' hands, then cleared their minds. "It's best if we have silence," said Hermione to the others, though Harry doubted anyone would have spoken anyway. Closing his eyes, he focused on love, and felt Fawkes perch on his shoulder.

The phoenixes sent the impression that it was done about ten minutes later. Harry didn't feel anything in particular while it was happening, which he supposed meant that his focus had been strong. Not yet opening his eyes, he sent an impression of wondering whether sending would now feel different than it had. She immediately sent back that it felt a little different; stronger, faster, more direct. Getting his first impression from her since the change, he could see what she meant. He sent that he imagined that the first really noticeable change would be when one of them sent something without having intended to; she agreed.

They let go of each other's hands and stood. "Okay, we're ready," said Hermione to McGonagall. McGonagall gestured

to the protective clothes, which Harry thought looked like long underwear as he picked them up. He and Hermione went into separate adjoining rooms; he took his robe and clothes off, put on the protective clothes, and put his usual clothes and robe back on over them. He came out, and a minute later, so did Hermione.

He put the Time-Turner around his neck, wrapping the long chain around his neck twice and tucking it under his robe. He reluctantly picked up the silver bracelet and put it on, clasping and unclasping it to make sure he knew how to take it off in case he needed it to help Hermione. He suddenly experienced a feeling of irritation and annoyance, with some affection mixed in. He turned to her and asked, "Was that you?"

"Was what me?" she asked, as the others watched, interested. "What did you get?"

"You were annoyed at me for fiddling with the bracelet," he said, suddenly understanding from her expression that she had unknowingly sent him the feeling. "You don't want me even thinking about using it on you."

"Of course I don't," she said impatiently. "It was obvious that you were thinking about taking it off, to use on me if it seemed like I needed it, even though you were told not to. I understand why, but it still needs to be saved for you."

"Now I'm getting fear," he said. "What exactly are you afraid of? That I'll use it on you, or that you'll have to use it on me?"

She exhaled in frustration. "Harry, this is going to take some getting used to. I'm getting stuff from you, too, that you don't mean to send. This is a very stressful and emotional situation, you can't be quizzing me on everything you get

from me, or I you." Harry could see that she had a point, but still wondered what she was afraid of; he reluctantly let it go.

"This seems as though it might be more of a distraction than a help," commented McGonagall. "It must be disconcerting for both of you."

"A bit," admitted Hermione, "but they say it'll save our lives, and I believe them. Are we ready to go?"

Harry nodded. Turning to Ginny, he leaned in to kiss her, but she put her hands on his shoulders and stopped him. "You'll get a kiss when you come out of there," she said with a smile, though her worry showed in her eyes. "It'll give you extra incentive to come back in one piece."

He gave her a small smile and said, "I have plenty of incentive, but I won't forget that." He took her hand and kissed the back of her fingers. "I will be back." He saw Hermione finish saying goodbye to Neville, and his eyes met Ron's, then Pansy's, then Neville's. Turning to McGonagall, he said, "We'll get in touch as soon as we can, once we've dealt with whatever's in the first room."

"Good luck," she said solemnly. He and Hermione nodded, then turned and walked through the empty wall, outside into the cold. They cast the Bubble-Head Charm on themselves, having been advised to do so by Flitwick and Snape in case there was an oxygen-poor environment in the first room. They then cast the Protection Charm on themselves as a precaution.

They stopped in front of the Ring, and Harry reached into his pocket for the Floo powder McGonagall had given him. Flitwick had told him that the name he used to enter had to be the one that the creator felt was his true name, so he

would have to say 'Lord Voldemort,' despite the fact that he had always said Voldemort's name but refused to use the title. He took out his wand and looked at Hermione, who had done the same; she nodded her readiness. He threw down the Floo powder.

"Lord Voldemort!" he shouted, and stepped on the Ring.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 23, The Ring of Reduction: Harry and Hermione make their way through part of the Ring relatively easily... and then discover, to their great dismay, that this was part of Voldemort's design.

From Chapter 23: "Okay, I think I'm as used to it as I'm going to get for now. So maybe I can stop thinking about that, and instead, think about this unbelievably grim situation we seem to be in."

"Yes, it looks really bad," she agreed. "Obviously, there's no going back. The problem is, of course, that there's probably equally bad, or worse, waiting for us. Any ideas on what we can do about it?"

23. Chapter 23

Chapter 23

The Ring of Reduction

They were suddenly inside, and the first thing Harry saw was a blur of movement, heading towards them. He registered in an instant that it was a four-legged animal of some sort, but a huge one. It had short, light brown fur with dark green spots, and it had to be seven feet tall and fifteen feet long, though he couldn't be sure, as it was moving toward him very quickly. Hermione touched the toggle of the time-stopping device, but the creature, or at least part of it, was inside its radius of effect. Harry had already decided that if there were any kind of creatures, he would first try the area-effect Imperius Charm. He quickly cast the Charm, hoping there would be an immediate effect, but there wasn't. The animal moved with lightning speed, and a huge paw slammed into Hermione, pushing her into Harry, knocking him across the room.

In an instant, he saw Hermione crumpled against the wall of the room, unconscious; it was as if she had Apparated there. Turning, wand at the ready, he saw the creature frozen in time, and he understood—it had knocked Hermione across the room, and the device had moved out of the creature's range and into Harry's. He had been deactivated by moving out of range, and then activated again.

He rushed to Hermione's side, and winced as he saw blood coming from nasty-looking slashes in her stomach, two large ones and a small one. To his amazement, the claws had ripped through all of her clothes, including the ones that were supposed to protect against physical damage. He saw

the end of another gash in her right shoulder, and gingerly moved her to check on her back. There was a gash in the backpack; clearly it had protected her from further damage. The cut on her shoulder stopped where the backpack started.

He reached into the backpack for the first aid kit, now grateful that he'd had the first aid training. With a Severing Charm he cut open her robe, then the protective clothes, until her bra and bare stomach were exposed. He wanted to report what had happened, but had to use both his hands to help Hermione. He stopped the bleeding, applied pressure magically as he'd been taught, then held up his hand. "We were attacked by something really big, with claws. Hermione got slashed, the creature's frozen in time, and..." He trailed off, annoyed at his own stupidity: the same effect that was keeping the creature frozen was causing the same for the outside world, from his perspective. Ginny's face, he saw in his hand, was as still as a Muggle photograph. He couldn't start time to talk to the others, or get advice from Healer Haspberg, without also activating the creature. He was on his own.

He cast the spells that checked her heartbeat and blood pressure. He then checked for internal bleeding, which there was. She could die, he thought in frustration, I don't know how bad her injuries are. He thought about using the Time-Turner and getting her to a hospital, but looking at the creature, he saw a major downside to it: the creature was right in front of the entrance, and would likely stay there if he left using the Time-Turner. That meant that the next time he tried to get in, it would be right on top of him, and would probably kill him before he could react. He thought of putting on the time-stopping device himself and trying to lure it away, but he realized it was so fast that once he activated the device, he wouldn't be able to de-activate it

before the creature attacked him. We can't get back out the way we came either, he thought, not without huge risk. Using the Time-Turner was the same as giving up, and therefore giving up on the people two centuries in the future. He had to consider it only as a last resort. He didn't know Hermione would die, he just feared it.

So, what do I do, he thought. I've done all the first aid I can, there's nothing else I can... the bracelet! Yes! He quickly took it off. He knew she would be angry with him, as would Snape and McGonagall, but he didn't care. He had to save her, that was what mattered at the moment. He put it on her, then looked carefully for a control or switch, which he didn't find; once on, it seemed perfectly smooth. He moved it up her wrist as far as possible, in case all parts of it had to be touching her skin, but it did no good. Was it the case that you just put it on the injured person, and then it worked or didn't work? He didn't know what else he could do, so he had to conclude it hadn't worked.

He knew also that he didn't have infinite time to wait for her to get better, as the device would at some point run out. He didn't fancy his chances against the... he turned for a better look, and saw that it looked like a leopard, though perhaps three times the size of a normal leopard. As he looked at it, he vaguely recalled having read about the creature in the first-year text 'Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them,' but couldn't recall what the creature was called. He did remember that if it was the one he thought it was, it took a hundred wizards to kill one. While he was much stronger than average, he didn't want to take it on if he could avoid it.

He turned back to Hermione, angry with himself. I dragged her into this, and for all my wonderful spells that I come up with, there's nothing I can do for her... or is there? He

suddenly remembered something that Healer Haspberg had said during their first aid training, that she had seen people perform nearly miraculous feats of self-healing by sheer power of will, by the belief that it would happen. He wondered if what he had in mind could work, then decided there was only one way to find out.

He cast the Imperius Charm on Hermione, willing her to wake up, if only a little, enough to hear what he was saying. Nothing happened for a half a minute, then she blinked, awake, but barely. "Hermione, can you hear what I'm saying?" he asked. She slowly nodded, eyes almost closed. "Good. Hermione, you're going to get better, and you're going to do it very fast. I want you to tell your body to get better faster than usual; you're going to be able to walk within twenty minutes. Tell your body to do whatever it has to do to make that happen. You can do it; you will do it." He stopped talking, continued the Imperius Charm, then sat next to her on the floor. He held her hand, willing her to get better quickly. He spoke occasionally, telling her she would soon recover, trying to reinforce the message he had already sent.

Ten minutes later, she blinked again, and looked up at him. He smiled, the Charm still in effect. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"I feel wonderful," she said, "which I suppose is because of the Imperius Charm. I recognize this feeling. Why are you using it?"

"I'm using it to help you get better," he explained. "I'm telling you to tell your body to heal, and it's working. Your wounds are even getting better," he added, gesturing to her stomach; there was already visible improvement.

She smiled and said, "Healer Haspberg will start demanding that you be on call at St. Mungo's, since you're the only one who can do it. It is working, I can feel it working, I can feel myself getting better. I think I'll be able to get up in a few minutes or so. I know we can't stay long." She looked up, at the frozen image of their attacker. "Wow, a Nundu... how in the world did he even catch one, never mind get it in here? Good thing we're using the Bubble-Head Charms, that thing's breath can kill you."

"I forgot about that," he admitted. "We won't be able to start time moving again until we're in the second room. Well, until we've dealt with whatever's in the second room."

She reached for her wand, and began to fix the clothes Harry had Severed in his haste to reach her wounds. "Thank you, Harry," she said earnestly. "Just to be safe, you should keep the Charm going until I'm able to get up and walk a bit."

He sent the next question rather than speaking it. Are you speaking and acting the same way you would if you weren't under the Imperius Charm?

Yes, she sent back. I'm in no pain and feel wonderful because of the Charm, but you're not affecting what I think or say, because that's not what you're trying to affect.

As she finished repairing her clothes, she noticed the presence of the bracelet on her arm; she reacted first with horror, then calmed down quickly and sent him a reproachful feeling. I should have known better than to trust you with that.

Again, that feeling of fear, he sent. Why?

Now, she spoke. "Because I don't want you to die."

"I know that," he responded, "but the feelings you've had connected to the bracelet have been more than that, like you're afraid for yourself too. It feels like there's something about it that you're not telling me. What is it?"

She answered immediately. "Snape lied to you about how it works. It does heal people who are almost dead, but the way it does it is by channeling the life energy of another person. Its purpose here was that if you were near death, I could bring you back, but I would die in the process. That was part of what was causing my fear; looking at it was like looking at my death. I wouldn't hesitate to do it, of course. I know you're angry, I can feel it. You need to stop, if you want to keep me under the Imperius Charm; I don't know if you can do both. Pay attention to Fawkes, he'll send you feelings of calm." Realizing that she was right, he did his best to do as she asked. His anger started to fade, replaced by sadness, as he tried to continue concentrating on sending love as part of the Imperius Charm.

She chose feelings to communicate next. I understand that you can't bear the idea of my deliberately sacrificing my life for yours. I can feel your feelings, you know I understand. But you also know that you can't die. If you die, he comes out now, or in two hundred years. Either way, many will die. You know that, and I know that doesn't make the feelings go away, but it's still true. I'm sorry, but you just have to accept it.

I wish I hadn't done this, he thought, not really meaning it. I could have chosen not to, it could end up costing you your life.

You had to do this, she reminded him. It only seemed optional, it really wasn't. And I don't want to die, but if I do, at least I know where we go. It's not so bad. But if I die, it's

only me. If you die, it's a lot of people. Another one of your burdens, I know. Now I feel like Snape was right, and Bright was wrong. You've done so much, this decision was yours to make. You should never feel bad about that.

I understand you didn't tell me about the bracelet before because you knew how I'd react, he sent. But why tell me now?

You asked, she sent. I'm under the Imperius Charm, remember. The purpose is to heal me, but while I'm under it, if you make a request or a wish, I have to follow it. If I weren't under the Charm, I would have avoided your question, like I did before we came in. I just had no choice but to answer it.

He cringed in discomfort as he understood her point. He sent his feelings of regret and anger at himself. I know you didn't mean to coerce me, she sent, you just forgot. I'm happy you were able to use it to heal me, to make me heal myself. I wouldn't have thought of it.

"I come up with the spells when I have to," he said, half-jokingly. "Do you think you're okay to get up?"

"I think so," she replied. "You should lift the Charm, see how I do."

He did, and she grimaced in pain. "Wow, the Charm really does mask the pain. It makes you feel so great, you don't even notice it. Don't worry, it's not that bad, just a surprise." Sensing his feelings, she added, "Please don't feel bad about that. It was a new situation, you'd never had to use the Charm for a long time on someone you cared about. You learned, you'll know not to do it again."

He nodded. "Why was I not killed, then, when I put the bracelet on you?"

"Fortunately, there's a certain thing you have to do once it's on, for it to work the way it's supposed to. And no, I'm not going to tell you what it is. You don't need it for me now anyway, you can do what you did again. Come on, help me up."

He took both of her hands, and slowly pulled her to her feet. "That thing is nasty," she muttered, referring to the Nundu. "We'd have been done for, if not for this device. But the odd thing is, he knew we had this. Why put something in the first room that we can avoid by using the device?"

"Remember, it was in the range of the device," Harry pointed out. "That had to have been deliberate. He figured we wouldn't be able to use it, and he was right. It was just sheer luck that it happened to knock both of us out of range. I guess it likes to play with its food before it eats." They slowly walked towards the door leading to the second room.

"Can you imagine what would have happened if we weren't wearing these clothes? It probably would've ripped a big chunk out of me." Harry found that he definitely didn't want to think about that.

They continued walking until they were in front of the second door. Harry put his hand on it, and it opened to reveal an inferno. They could see nothing but fire, the most intense fire Harry had ever seen. "Well, at least we can do this," he said. "But again, this is strange, he knows I have the area-effect fire-suppression charm. Why do this?"

She shrugged. "Maybe he thinks it won't work if it's intense enough. I'm sure he's wrong, of course. Ready?"

"The charm will go on as soon as we're in," he said. "Seems strange to walk into a fire, but... okay, here we go." Wands in their hands, they walked through the barrier into the second room.

Harry felt the fire for a fleeting instant before the fire-suppression charm took effect, creating a large, fire-free area around them. The door closed behind them. "Okay, you should turn off the device now," he suggested. "It's not going to help in here."

She did so, and within a second he felt a sharp pain in his right arm, then another in his left thigh. "Turn it back on!" he shouted, and she did.

"Look," he said, pointing to his arm. Something metallic was sticking out of it. He had never seen anything like it before; it was roughly spherical, but with razor-sharp edges protruding all around it. "It's not the same, but it reminds me of those things ninjas throw, in those movies."

"I tried not to watch movies where lots of people got killed, but I have read about what you mean. It does look like it's the same principle, yes. Sit down, I'll take care of it."

"There's one in my leg, too," he added, wincing in pain.

She took out the first-aid kit, and applied a local anesthetic to his arm, then removed the metal ball, using her wand. She moved his robe aside, and unbuttoned enough of his protective shirt to move it aside to get to the wound. It took her only a minute to repair it. She started on the one on his leg; the metal was embedded in the side of his left thigh. She removed the metal, then pulled his robe off. "You have to get these off, or at least past the wound," she said, gesturing to the protective clothing that covered his lower half. Feeling his embarrassment, she added, "You're still

wearing underwear, Harry, and this is no time for modesty anyway. And you saw my bra, after all."

"Okay, I see your point," he admitted. "Just a usual reaction, I guess." He pulled the pants down to his knees, and she took less than a minute to heal the wound.

As he stood and put his robe back on, he said, "I guess we're going to have to use the Repulsion Charm too. But I can't do both."

"I'll extend mine around you, too," she said. "Stay right behind me, I'm pretty sure it'll work. Once I start time going again, we'll just walk straight, and we'll talk to Neville and Ginny, let them know what's happened. I'll tell them about this room, you tell them about the last one. Ready?"

She pushed the toggle of the device, and they moved forward again. He felt his hand tingle, and he looked at it. "We're fine, we're going through the second room now." He went on to describe what had happened in the first room. They reached the door leading to the third room, and stopped in front of it to complete their accounts, Harry now standing against the wall so Hermione could protect him with her body and Repulsion Charm. He saw Ginny speaking as he spoke to her; he knew that she was repeating what he said to the others as he said it, to save time.

After he finished, she said, "Snape is surprised the second room isn't worse than it is; Voldemort should know you could get through it. I see what he means."

"Me, too," Harry agreed. "Maybe they'll get worse as we go along. I'm opening the door to the third room now."

"Sand," he reported. "All I can see is sand."

"Snape says it's probably quicksand," Ginny reported. "He says that Voldemort mentioned once that he liked the idea of quicksand. He also says there must be something else in there that you can't see now, it wouldn't just be quicksand. That's too easy to get past with a Hover Charm."

Harry saw Snape's point. "Okay, I'll reach in with a hand, see if the air's any different." He put his left hand through, and yanked it back immediately, in considerable pain, grimacing.

"What?" exclaimed a very concerned Ginny.

"Extreme cold," said Harry. "There's no way we can get through it without some kind of protection against it, we'd freeze solid before we got to the next door."

"Snape's surprised again," said Ginny, "because he says that while this is difficult, it's not overly difficult. Like the last one, he expected something worse. He thinks the temperature is absolute zero."

Hermione turned to him. "McGonagall says I should do the Hover Charm for both of us, you should generate the heat to protect us." Harry had learned the spell from the Aurors, who sometimes had to operate in very cold environments; he assumed that Hermione knew it too, but that he should do it because a lot of magical power would be necessary to compensate for a temperature of absolute zero. "The hard part will be the transition from this room to the next. We'll have to jump into the next room, as high as we can; I'll switch from the Repulsion Charm to the Hover Charm, and you from the fire-extinguishing spell to the heat-generating one. You can't switch your spell too soon, or we'll burn to death; if I do mine too late, we could get trapped in quicksand. Are you ready?"

"Ready," he affirmed.

"Okay, on three. One,-"

"Wait a minute," he interrupted her. "When you say 'on three,' does that mean the one just after three, or-"

"I've never understood why that's not clear," she said, exasperated. "On three means just that, on three. You say, one, two, then you go when you would say three."

"Just making sure," he said defensively. "A misunderstanding right now could kill us, you know."

"I just never saw that it could work another way, but yes, it's better to be careful. I'll say, one, two, then on three, we jump. Okay?"

"Okay," he agreed.

"Ready? Okay. One, two, three!" They jumped, and Harry felt a brief blast of extreme cold before activating the heat-generating spell. But in the same instant, he felt himself being yanked downward, and before he knew it, he was thigh-deep in quicksand. He knew Hermione hadn't done the Hover Charm incorrectly, since he had the feeling of being pulled down rather than falling.

"Harry!" screamed Ginny in his head; he tried to ignore it, since he had to focus on getting himself and Hermione out of the situation. "Hold onto me, and do the heat spell!" he shouted at Hermione. As soon as he felt the extra heat from her wand, he ceased his own heat spell and conjured an Attaching Rope, as the Aurors had taught him; the rope had the property of sticking to anything it touched, except for the person who conjured it. Without Hermione's Hover Charm, they were starting to sink faster; the quicksand was

up to his chest as he magically sent the end of the rope up to the ceiling. Hermione grabbed the fabric of his robes around his right shoulder, causing him to wince in pain as she pressed the spot where the metal ball had hit him in the second room; then she was able to get her left arm around his neck. The added weight pushed him down further; now only his neck was above the surface of the quicksand.

Firmly holding onto the Attaching Rope, he was no longer sinking, but it was taking all his strength to hold onto the rope; it still felt like they were being pulled down. Remembering the obstacle in the Triwizard maze that had made him feel as though he would fall into the sky, he decided that something like that was necessary. He silently cast a spell, and got what he wanted: the ceiling suddenly became the floor, and he and Hermione plunged toward the ceiling. Not expecting to suddenly fall upwards, Hermione yelled in alarm, but continued to hold onto Harry's neck.

As they fell, Harry modulated the degree of the spell, and they started falling more slowly. Just as they were about to hit the ceiling, Harry modulated it further, and they were hovering in midair. Hermione reflexively threw her free arm around his waist and clung to him, not sure what would happen next.

Harry let go of the rope, and it floated freely. His left hand free, he looked at it. "The... gravity, I guess, of this room seems to be different," he reported. "Hermione did a Hover Charm, but we fell anyway. I did an Attaching Rope to stop us sinking, then I did... well, I don't know what it is, but I reversed our gravity, and we fell up. I've got it just now so it compensates for whatever Voldemort did. We're floating near the ceiling now, Hermione's doing the heat."

"Not very well," she added, speaking into her own hand. "I'm doing it the best I can, but it feels like it's zero centigrade, it's pretty cold."

"Snape's mad at himself, he says he should have thought of that, that the room would have extra gravity," said Ginny. "McGonagall's saying we can save the blame for later, now we have to get you out of that room."

"Hard to argue with that," agreed Harry, still talking into his hand. "The only thing I can think of right now is another Attaching Rope. Hermione, start wrapping this one around us. When I conjure the new one and send it to the wall, the room's gravity will take over for a few seconds, and we'll have to hang onto this rope."

Hermione let go of Harry and started wrapping the rope around them, then clung to Harry again, left hand with wand around Harry's shoulders and neck, right hand holding the rope. Harry hoped he could manage the dexterity to do what he had to do, since one hand would be supporting his weight on the rope, and the other would have a wand in it; he had to use that hand to throw the new rope against the far wall. "Ready?" he asked Hermione.

"As I'll ever be," she responded.

Harry conjured another Attaching Rope; gravity pulled hard, and he barely managed to hold onto the first rope as he grabbed the new one at one end. He sent the other end hurtling toward the door, guiding its direction with magic; it hit and stuck to the wall a few feet above the door. He resumed the gravity spell, and he and Hermione were floating again. He flexed his left hand, which felt raw from the cold, and supporting so much weight. He looked into it

and said, "Okay, the second rope is in position. We should be able to pull ourselves over."

They let go of the old rope and used the new one, Hermione still holding onto Harry, Harry pulling them along the rope. They were still hovering, but slowly descending, as the rope was attached to the wall at a lower spot. After a minute, they arrived at the far wall. "Okay, we're there," he said into his hand. "We're hovering in front of the door; I'm going to open it to see what's in the fourth room."

He put his hand to the door, and it opened. It looked completely blank, with nothing in it at all; he reported it to Ginny. After a short pause, she said, "Snape says, 'whatever is in there will no doubt manifest itself once you enter. You should prepare to react to whatever might suddenly appear.'"

"Tell him, I will," he replied.

"We have to go in together," said Hermione, "since it takes both of us to stay alive in this room. Ready?"

"On three," he said. "One, two, three!"

They pulled themselves through the door, and fell to the ground as Harry gradually diminished the spell he was using to compensate for the extra gravity in the third room; Hermione turned off the heat generated by her wand. Harry looked around, alert for danger, but there was none.

Suddenly, Voldemort appeared in the center of the room. "Welcome, Potter."

Harry immediately cast the Imperius Charm, but it had no effect. He ran forward, thinking it had to be because Voldemort was out of range. Sending a message of caution

mixed with the knowledge that he wouldn't heed it, Hermione ran as well, just behind him. He tried the Charm again from a range of ten feet, and again it was ineffective. As he wondered why, Hermione spoke. "It's an image, Harry. A memory." She started speaking into her hand quietly.

"I have become immune to that spell of yours!" said Voldemort loudly, sneering at what he knew would be Harry's attempt to use it on him. "Well, perhaps not. I am a mere memory. Soon you will be as well, simply in a different way." Hermione continued speaking; Harry realized that she was repeating Voldemort's words to Neville, who would then relay them to the others.

"I would applaud you for getting this far, Potter, except that I have not made it as difficult as I could have. If you are here it means that Pettigrew, worthless creature that he is, provided me one final service: his betrayal of me. I knew he would go to you, and the spell I put on him only made him want to do it all the more. Of course, I knew he would travel as a rat. You could let me rest, and live out a long and happy life with many children," continued Voldemort, with an especially nasty sneer, "but you came here instead, as I knew you would. You may be strong, but you are terribly easy to manipulate. That is no less true now than it was two years ago, when your beloved godfather met his untimely demise because you were too foolish to think clearly." Harry felt anger building, and he suddenly received strong feelings of calm from Hermione. He's trying to bait you, she reminded him. Focus on love, stay focused. Calming down, he did his best to do that as Voldemort continued speaking.

"Harry Potter, boy of destiny," Voldemort went on. "'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord,' says the prophecy. You became obsessed, you had to find me, to fulfill the prophecy. But you did not understand that the prophecy

has already been fulfilled; you 'vanquished' me the day I killed your parents. Especially now, you cannot do so again. I saw in your mind that you are convinced that you will, which is foolishly wrong. That you would subject yourself to this danger only proves that you are not in your right mind. You would do much better to turn back, live your quiet and happy life, and leave fate to itself. But of course, you will not. I suspect you did not even consider the question of whether to come in here, that you knew you would, and did not consider the counsel of those who do not blindly agree with your every thought.

"You had your chance, and you didn't manage it. Now you have no chance at all. Well, that is not true. You have one more chance, simply a different type. You can do what you have refused to consider. You can turn back; I generously offer this warning. Entering the fifth room will seal your fate. You will not die there, but you will know immediately and unquestionably that you are doomed. I do not expect that you will do as I suggest, but the offer is there anyway. I tell you only that if you do not do as I suggest, you will soon wish you had. And when you do die, I will be awakened, and resume my rightful place as the most powerful wizard in the world.

"So, there you are. Do as you will." He stopped speaking, and the image vanished.

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione, then looked at his hand. "I want to know what Professor Snape thinks."

"It does not tell us much more than we already knew," said Ginny, repeating Snape's words verbatim. "He is overconfident, which is amply illustrated by the fact that he used an entire room for this purpose."

"Basically, he's taunting me," observed Harry.

"Yes, which is another sign of weakness," said Snape through Ginny. "Even inducing you to come here was such an indication. Nothing has changed, Professor. There is still no reason to believe that you cannot handle whatever is to come."

"Does he believe that whatever's in the fifth room will finish us?"

"Yes, he does; the Dark Lord does not make empty threats. But he does miscalculate, as we have seen."

"Ginny, would you ask Professor Flitwick if he thinks it's even possible for the doors to be set so that they can't open?"

Now repeating Flitwick's words, Ginny said, "I don't think they can be set that way, but I also wouldn't have thought it was possible to get a Nundu in there. I have a feeling that whatever it is, that's not it."

"Me, too," said Harry to himself. To Ginny, he asked, "Ginny, how are you doing?"

She gave him a brave smile. "I'm all right, as long as I don't think too much. It probably helped that even though it's been almost a half hour for you, it's been only ten minutes for me. Keep using that device, and it'll be over before I know it."

"I'll see what I can do," he said. "By the way, there's something I think I should mention. When we entered the third room and we fell into the quicksand, you yelled into your hand—"

"Yes, I know, I'm sorry," she cut him off. "McGonagall and Snape already talked to me about that, said that it could have distracted you, maybe enough to get you killed. I'm really sorry. I just reacted, because I could see from your face that you were in trouble. This is really hard for me, too, you know."

"I know," he assured her. "I just wanted to make sure you knew."

"Professor McGonagall says to remind you that he said the fifth room wouldn't kill you. Even if it looks like he's right and you seem doomed, there's always the Time-Turner. He doesn't know that you have that."

"That's true," said Harry. "Not that I would have stopped anyway, just because he decided he wanted to gloat in advance. I'll just be extra-ready. Hermione?"

She nodded, and they walked forward, up to the door of the fifth room. He opened the door, and again, they saw nothing. "I don't suppose it's more taunting?" Harry joked to Hermione. "Like, 'ha, ha, made you look?'"

"Somehow, I don't think so," she said, standing near the edge of the door to see in better. She talked to Neville on her hand, reporting what they saw. "Harry, I'm going in first. If whatever it is—"

"No way," he said vehemently. "I will, if anyone will. I can defend myself better."

"He said we wouldn't be killed here, and I think it's probably true," she pointed out. "I'm just thinking, what if it seals us in there somehow, or does something else strange that we can't imagine. You can still get back out—"

"We can both get back out, with the Time-Turner," he reminded her.

"Yes, but still, I'd feel better. Please don't argue with me. I promise to jump right back through if something happens."

With deep reluctance, he nodded. She stepped forward, and seemed to walk right into a wall. Harry put a hand through the opening, or tried to, and he too came up against a wall. Having a sudden idea, he took Hermione's hand, and successfully moved their hands through the opening. "It looks like it has to be both of us," he said.

"It seems like that's not really good," she suggested nervously. "Whatever happens, he wants to make sure it happens to both of us."

"It'll be okay," he assured her. "Ready?"

She nodded. Hyper-alert, ready to use his wand at the first sign of anything, he stepped through the door, her hand on his shoulder. They were through... and to Harry's astonishment, not only was the wand suddenly gone from his hand, but his clothes had disappeared as well. He and Hermione turned to each other, shocked, and reflexively used their hands to cover themselves. The same thing had happened to Hermione, he saw, and it included the pack with the supplies, the extra wands... he looked at his neck, and saw that the Time-Turner was gone as well. A sickening feeling of dread overtook him, and he wasn't sure whether it was his or hers.

He held up his left hand, keeping his right hand where it was. "Well, now we know what the fifth room does."

Ginny stopped his explanation. "We saw," she said. "Everything suddenly appeared just outside the Ring. Your

clothes, the artifacts, Hermione's backpack. They appeared at exactly the places they would be at if you were wearing them, and fell to the ground. Harry, this is really bad." He felt fear, but she was clearly more frightened than he was. Hermione, talking to Neville on her hand, was having difficulty in looking at her hand while both arms were busy covering herself.

"Harry, Professor McGonagall wants to know if you and Hermione are using your hands to cover yourselves."

"Of course we are," he said, mildly annoyed. "I think most people would be."

"She's saying the same thing to Hermione, through Neville. She says, quote, 'Put your hands at your sides, and look at each other.'"

Too stunned to answer immediately, he finally managed, "Why?"

"She says, 'You have much greater problems than being unclothed. Your full attention and focus must be on your situation and your surroundings, so you must adapt to the current situation. You cannot accomplish anything with your hands where they are now.' Honestly, I think she's right, Harry. I know it's strange, but you have to be able to focus on getting out of there."

"Easy for her to say, she's not the one standing here naked," grumbled Harry. "Don't repeat that," he added quickly.

"Sorry, too late," said Ginny. "I'm repeating everything; if you want something not to be repeated, you have to tell me first."

He sighed, and turned to Hermione. This has to be the weirdest situation we've ever been in, he sent. And, really embarrassing.

I'm embarrassed too, she sent. Speaking, she added, "But McGonagall's right, we have to get past this. We'll move our hands away at the same time, all right?"

"On three?" asked Harry, and they smiled. "One, two, three."

They moved their hands to their sides, and Harry found he had competing impulses to look and not look. I feel the same way, she sent. I feel like it's rude to look, but I know we have to get used to it. Don't worry about it, and I'll try not to as well.

More embarrassed as soon as the thought occurred, Harry accidentally sent his concern about unintended physical reactions. The first reaction he got back was amusement. If that happens, don't worry about that, either. I've learned that men don't have total control over that.

More like, almost no control at all, he sent. Did she say how long we were supposed to look?

Until we get used to it, she sent. Until we can focus on our situation without being tempted to take glances, or think about it much.

That could be awhile, he responded.

She sent him back part of what he'd inadvertently sent her. You're attracted to me, she sent, and you don't want to admit that you are because it makes you feel bad thinking about how Ginny would feel. I understand, but you shouldn't worry about that, either. I'm attracted to you, too, right now. It's the most natural thing in the world to react like that

when you're with a naked person of the opposite sex. That's part of the reactions we have to get used to. You shouldn't feel bad; again, it would only be a problem if you were thinking how you preferred me to Ginny, and I can tell you're not thinking that. So, don't worry.

I'll try, he sent. Funny thing about people, how I can be worried about us having lost our clothes when it looks like we can't possibly survive this. He looked a little more, then said, "Okay, I think I'm as used to it as I'm going to get for now. So maybe I can stop thinking about us being naked, and instead, think about this unbelievably grim situation we seem to be in."

"Yes, it looks really bad," she agreed. "Obviously, there's no going back. The problem is, of course, that there's probably equally bad, or worse, waiting for us. Any ideas on what we can do about it?"

"I think," he said, "we're going to find out exactly what, if any, wandless magic I can do. I mean, I did say that I came up with stuff when I had to, but this is a totally different situation. But who knows, remember, children do wandless magic when they're in life-threatening situations. I know it looks extremely bad, but I'm not going to give up."

She gave him an encouraging smile. "I'd be amazed if you did." Looking into her hand, she said, "Neville, ask Professor Flitwick if there's any chance at all of Disapparating out of a Ring of Reduction." She listened for the answer, and nodded glumly. "I didn't think so, I just wanted to make sure." Harry was surprised he hadn't gotten the answer in his head from Ginny; she usually repeated everything any of the professors said.

After a minute, Ginny spoke. "Professor Snape says, 'Please inform Professor Potter that while I did not foresee this particular circumstance, I remain confident that he will find a way to do what is necessary to escape the situation and defeat the Dark Lord.'"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "And then be elevated to the foremost spot among the pantheon of gods?"

"I don't get it, but he says, 'I will forgive his little joke at my expense if he comes out of there carrying the Dark Lord, unconscious, in his arms.'"

"Tell him I'll do my best, but I find the kiss you promised to be a better motivator."

"He just rolled his eyes," Ginny reported. "But I'm glad to hear it."

"So, ask Professor McGonagall, what's the situation regarding wandless magic? I've never heard much about it one way or the other, but I know it can be done, I've done it several times without meaning to. If there's a way to get out of here by blowing someone up, then we're all right. I just need to get mad enough."

After a slight pause, Ginny said, "Professor McGonagall says, 'Relatively little is known about it; what little is known works in your favor. The more life-threatening the situation, the more likely attempts at wandless magic will be met with success. The best thing to do is imagine that you have a wand in your hand, and do what you would normally do.'"

"Sounds reasonable to me," agreed Harry. "Ready?" he asked Hermione.

She spoke rather than sent, but he could feel her fear through their link. "Do you really think we have a chance? I mean, look at us. I don't mind admitting—"

"You don't have to, I can feel it," he said. "And yes, I think we have a chance. Something just occurred to me. The reason the phoenixes made this link for us was that they thought it could save our lives. Well, it hasn't done that yet, so it's reasonable to think that it will still happen, which means we'll get through at least one more room. But I also think it means we have a chance to go all the way. I think 'saving our lives' means 'making sure we get through this.'"

"An interesting point," she admitted. "That's definitely what you'd call looking on the bright side. Okay, that's enough for me, for now. Let's go."

They walked to the door of the sixth room. "Harry, I just noticed something," said Hermione, looking at him intently. "You still have your glasses. Why is that?"

Harry was so used to his glasses, he hadn't even noticed that they should have been gone. "I don't know. Maybe... ah, okay, I do know. It's another taunt. It's his way of saying, 'I'll let you keep your glasses, for all the good it'll do you. See, you should have listened to me.'" His face became a mask of determination. "He's going to regret that. Come on, let's go."

He opened the door, and they looked inside to see yet another empty room. "Well, there's no raging inferno, so I'd say it's fairly good so far," remarked Harry. Hermione reported in on her hand, then nodded her readiness to proceed. They entered the room, Harry again at full readiness... to do what, he wasn't sure. But he was ready, he knew that.

Wondering when something was going to happen, they slowly walked to the center of the room. "Remember, we have to turn right at the center to get to the door to the seventh room," Hermione reminded him. They reached the center, and the lighting started to dim. As he was about to say something to Hermione, who was on his right, he heard a voice from his left. "Harry!"

He turned, and gaped to see a smiling Sirius Black standing a few feet away from him. "S-S-Sirius?" he stuttered.

"Harry? What's going on?" asked Ginny in his head, obviously having seen his expression in her hand.

"Just a minute, I'll explain later," he said, staring at Sirius.

"Yes, it's me," grinned Sirius. "I'd give you a hug, but, you know, it doesn't quite seem right at the moment. Are you sure you aren't having one of those dreams where you forget to put your clothes on?"

Harry chuckled. "Yes, it kind of feels like that. What are you doing here? I thought... well, I mean..."

"That I'm dead," Sirius clarified. "Yes, that's true, but we are allowed to visit once in a while, so you're my first visit. Okay, maybe it's not such a great compliment, since now that Dumbledore's gone, the only people I'd really want to visit are you and Remus. Well, and there is old Snivellus, I could say hello to him, just to bother him. Hang around for a bit, make him worry that I'd start haunting him."

Harry chuckled; Sirius's sense of humor was much like he'd remembered. "Well, he's a lot better now, though," explained Harry.

"Yeah, but he still hates me, though. Not that I care, but you'd think he'd let some things go. But let's talk about you! Been having quite a busy life, I see. I really envy that. Twelve years in Azkaban, then when I finally did get free, became a prisoner in that rat-hole of a house, all because Dumbledore was so 'concerned' about me. If he was so concerned, he'd have let me live! Live, not just survive. People need to be useful, and not just so they can order some demented house-elf around. You know that, look at what you've been doing. At the center of the fight against Voldemort, not safely rotting in your room at Privet Drive. There are worse things than death, Harry. Dumbledore didn't understand that, but I think you do."

Harry was surprised that Sirius was this bitter, but then he remembered, Sirius had an unusually hard life. "He meant well."

Sirius shook his head. "Maybe he did, but he sure didn't act like it at times. You should know that, all those times he left you to stew for the summer with the Dursleys, when the Weasleys would have loved to have you. Hell, he could have left you at Hogwarts! You'd have been just as safe, and it would have been a lot more fun. People could have visited you, you could have learned more, and Dumbledore, who supposedly cared about you so much, could have spent time with you, helped you deal with being Harry Potter. If safety was the only reason for your staying at the Dursleys', then it wasn't a very good one."

Harry had wondered the same thing before, but didn't want to admit it. "Maybe he just didn't think of it."

Sirius laughed. "Hell of a thing not to think of, when it could have made your life so much less miserable. And speaking of that, did he really have to leave you with the Dursleys in

the first place? He knew perfectly well what they were like, McGonagall even warned him that they weren't the kind of people who would treat you well. He said that they were the only family you had. Ridiculous! I was your family, Harry, and we weren't related. The Weasleys are your family, and you aren't related. The dictionary may say family are the people you're related to, but I know better, and so should he have. Family are the people who love you and care for you, who want to be with you, who don't consider it a burden to have you around, no matter for how long. The Dursleys were never that, to put it mildly. He said it was to protect you, but there were other ways. All those long days, those times you wished you were somewhere else, all the times you were made to feel bad for no reason, he was responsible for that. If he had really cared for you, he would have made sure you didn't suffer like that. He would have made sure you were happy instead of making sure that you just survived."

Harry's heart was beating faster; he heard Ginny saying something in his head, but he ignored it, caught up in the feelings that were overtaking him. He didn't want to think that way about Dumbledore, but Sirius had said several things that he himself had wondered about before. He knew Dumbledore cared for him, but surely it was better to be placed in some risk rather than be subjected to the childhood he had been subjected to. "He may have made a mistake," Harry admitted. "But he meant well."

Sirius snorted. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions, you may have heard. But I can see why you'd sympathize with that point of view. You meant well, when you ran off to the Ministry two years ago. You meant to save me from being tortured, which is a very good intention. But, look what happened."

Harry's face fell; Sirius couldn't be suggesting what it sounded like he was... could he? "Do you mean... you think what happened was my fault?"

"Well, you meant well," said Sirius, imitating Harry's tone when he had said it about Dumbledore a minute ago. "I don't have to tell you that, Harry, you know it already. You've told yourself dozens of times. You eventually stopped, but only because you'd have made yourself crazy if you continued. People can rationalize anything, if you give them enough time. But you know the truth. If you'd just stopped and thought, you wouldn't have gone running off, and I wouldn't have had to go get killed trying to save you. And if you had tried to avoid the dreams instead of welcoming them, it wouldn't have happened either. You did what you wanted, with no regard for the consequences."

Ginny's voice was fading, now almost gone; his whole focus was on Sirius, and the sadness welling up. He fought back tears as he answered. "I... I thought you would have..."

"You thought I wouldn't say things like this," said Sirius, looking at Harry as though he could see through him. "You thought I'd be all heavenly and forgiving and Dumbledore-y. I'm not saying I couldn't forgive you, but you have to face up to what you've done, all of it. This is your history, this is who you are. You've never stopped rushing into action without thinking, doing things that a little thought would have helped you understand could get people killed. Or even yourself; look at what you did with Ginny and that Portkey in Hogsmeade. Rushing in without thinking. You didn't even seriously consider not doing this, and look where you are, without a chance of getting out alive. You have to own up to it, and then maybe I can forgive you."

Harry felt the tears coming, and tried to stop them, but couldn't. "I'm sorry," he managed to get out. "I'm so sorry..."

"Well, that does me a lot of good, doesn't it?" sneered Sirius. "But as long as you're being sorry, it shouldn't only be me that hears about it. I think you may owe them an apology, too." He gestured to Harry's right, where Harry saw, to his horror, the girl and three boys who had been killed in the Three Broomsticks in the first attack on Hogsmeade.

The tears stopped, if only because Harry was so astonished. He had forgotten where he was and what he had been doing; he was totally preoccupied by what he was experiencing. "What are you doing here?" he asked them.

"We were your first sacrifices, to your cause," said one. "The first of many." More Hogwarts students suddenly appeared behind them, the ones killed in the assassin attack.

Lisa Turpin stepped forward. "It turned out that criticizing your friends brings the death penalty. If I'd known, I'd have kept my mouth shut. My father was right, and you know it. You should have left, conducted your crusade where there weren't so many innocent lives at risk. All of us were seventeen or younger, our lives cut short because of you. And it turns out to be all for nothing, after all. Yet you keep telling yourself you're doing the right thing."

"I didn't kill you!" Harry shouted through his tears, fighting the urge to run.

"You might as well have," she shot back. "I don't have to tell you this, you know it. You just put it out of your mind, in the same place you put all the things you don't want to face up to, that you tell yourself you have to do, for your cause."

"Things like us," added a female voice from behind. Harry whirled to see Rita Skeeter and Cornelius Fudge. "We were innocent, or at least, didn't deserve to die. But you condoned our deaths, you not only let our killer go free, you helped him, you supported him."

"You didn't like us, so you didn't mind seeing us die," said Fudge, his gaze boring into Harry. "You protected Bright and not me because you like him and you didn't like me, that's all there was to it. You were hoping I'd die, so you could get a new Minister, maybe one you thought was better—"

"That's not true!" shouted Harry, breathing heavily, tears occasionally rolling down his face.

"You can't lie to us," said Skeeter contemptuously. "We know better. We're dead, remember? Maybe you didn't think it consciously, but it was in the back of your mind. And you were happy I died, don't deny that."

Sirius stepped forward. "This is your legacy, Harry. The path of destruction you've left in your wake. The consequences of your carelessness, your impulsiveness, your moral compromises—"

"No!" Harry screamed; he felt as though he literally couldn't stand still, couldn't stand to hear any more. He ran away from them, as fast as he could. He wasn't looking around him, he didn't know where he was, but he kept running.

Sirius's voice seemed to come from all around him. "You can't hide from us! No matter how far you run, we'll always be with you!" He kept running until finally he fell to the ground, exhausted.

He felt love, reaching out to him. No, it's a trick, he thought, they just want me to come out again, so they can tell me

more about how bad I am, what I did. I can't listen to it anymore, I can't stand it. I have to stay here.

Don't be afraid, she sent with love. It's me, it's Hermione.

Go away, he thought, leave me alone. You're trying to trick me, to get me to come out. You're just going to tell me about how I got you killed, how all these awful things happened to you because of me. Leave me alone.

She sent him more feelings of love. I'm not dead, she sent, and I chose everything that's happened. I don't regret anything I did to help you. I love you, I want you back. Please come with me.

You couldn't love me, look at what I've done. You're not dead, but you soon will be, because of me. I should have gone alone, I should have done everything alone. Look at everyone who's died because of me. Leave me alone, no one else will suffer because of me if I stay here.

People will suffer if you stay there, she sent patiently. You're doing this to save people, and you have. You've saved dozens, hundreds. Please come out, they're gone. They won't bother you again. Ginny needs you, she's worried about you. For her sake, please come back. Just look around, there's nobody there. Just me.

He sent his feelings of fear; she continued to reassure him that he was safe, that he would be all right. He sent images of what had happened. That wasn't Sirius, she sent. None of those people were real. We're in the Ring of Reduction, and the room you were in was set with some artifact that causes people's worst fears to come to life. They run away, hide in their mind like you are now, and eventually go into a coma and die. If that happens, Voldemort wins, and I'll die too. I

can't get out of here without you. I love you, Ginny loves you, we want you back. Please come back.

She continued sending him love. He was afraid to move, but he didn't want her to die, he didn't want any more people to die because of him. He had to help her. How do I come back, he asked.

Just focus on my feelings, she sent. Focus on that, and open your eyes. You can do it.

He felt as though going back was difficult, like a leap off a cliff. He knew he had to, though. He tried to open his eyes, to will himself back.

He looked up and saw Hermione's worried face. He looked around and saw that they were sitting on the floor in the Ring, in the fifth room. Then he remembered what had happened, what he had seen, and he burst out in tears. She moved closer to him and held him, one arm around his back, one holding his head. He put his head on her shoulder and cried.

It'll be all right, she sent. It's over now. That wasn't real.

The people weren't real, but what happened to them was, he sent as he continued to cry. I'm responsible for that.

No, you aren't, she sent. You only fear that you are, that's what the room does. You've been through all this, and the conclusions you've reached aren't rationalizations, they're the truth. Fewer people have died than would have if you'd done nothing. That's the truth. Your mind showed you that because it's what you fear, but it's not the truth. You're not responsible, the ones who did the killing are. You know that.

It's hard to accept. Part of me knows you're right, it's just hard to accept.

I know, she sent, but it's true.

A few seconds later, as Hermione continued sending love, Harry heard Ginny's voice in his head. Desperation in her voice, she exclaimed, "Harry, I was so worried, I'm so glad you're back. It'll be all right, I heard what happened. I love you, we all do. You'll be all right. Just remember I love you, I always will."

His tears started to fade as he focused on her. He moved his left hand off Hermione's back and held it up. "I love you too," he said. He took a few deep breaths, trying to recover. He felt he was finally getting back into his right mind. He moved his head off Hermione's shoulder, and looked at her. "Thanks," he said.

She nodded compassionately. "I'm just glad you made it back."

"I never would have, if not for you." He wiped his eyes with his hand, and with a very small smile, asked, "Do you have any tissues?"

She chuckled, happy that he felt better enough to make a joke. "I seem to be out, sorry."

"I assume the same thing happened to you," he said, thinking about it for the first time. "And I assume it was Skeeter. How did you get out of there?"

"Yes, it was Skeeter," she said, clearly troubled at the memory. "It was pretty bad, as you can imagine. As for how I got out... ironically, it was because of you, indirectly. Neville was able to pull me back before I got too far gone—"

"I heard Ginny too, at first, but I kept ignoring her. Eventually, I couldn't hear her."

"The same thing would've happened to me... except he was able to fight for my attention in a way Ginny couldn't. Talking to Ginny, he found that you were slipping away from her, and he could see the same thing happening with me. But unlike Ginny, he could turn up the volume on the way my hand tingled. It tingled so much it was painful, and I couldn't ignore it. He talked to me, made me tell him what was happening. Skeeter's image kept trying to get my attention away, but Neville was persistent, and he talked me back. Apparently Snape had heard of the artifact, and was able to tell Neville what it did, so he could tell me. That helped me get the strength to ignore Skeeter, and get out of the room. Once I was in here, my mind cleared up, and I was able to go in there and drag you out, then try to get you to come back. It took a while, I was afraid it wouldn't work. But it did, and the reason is..." She prompted him with her eyes.

His mouth opened slightly as realization dawned. "The phoenixes, what they did, the link they made. Without that, you couldn't have reached me."

She nodded. "I don't think it would have worked through them, it would have been too indirect. I had to be there in a strong and direct way."

"I still think we can get out of here," he said. "I don't think they'd have bothered to do this if we were certain to die, and maybe their intuition would have told them if we faced certain death, and they'd have told us. Are you ready to go to the seventh room?"

"Ready when you are," she agreed. "We have to go through that room again, of course, but this time we know what's

going to happen, we can deal with it. They'll talk to us; Skeeter did when I went back in to get you, but I was able to ignore her. We'll both have to do that. Okay?"

"I can do it," he said. "The real Sirius wouldn't want me to pay attention to that, I'll just keep that in mind. By the way, do you think-or, does Snape think-that this was put here just for us to suffer a bit?"

"It could easily have killed us," she pointed out, "but yes, Snape thinks that's basically it, that he wanted us to suffer. Whatever's in rooms seven and eight, he must be pretty sure we can't get past it. Snape still thinks he's wrong."

"Funny, I was saying before that a lot of the times I've survived it's been because of others, not me, and that happened now even though we're in here alone. Without the phoenixes and Neville, we would've been done."

"And I'm sure we'll get outside help again, if we need it," she assured him. "Let's go." She took his hand to make sure they wouldn't be separated.

They walked into the sixth room, and Sirius appeared again, about ten feet in. He talked to Harry, taunting him, but Harry resolutely ignored him, walking through his image at one point, and looking over to Hermione for support at another. They were soon at the door to the seventh room, and Harry put his hand on it to open it. They saw a vast space, with no walls or ceiling; it seemed to go on forever. Harry wanted to pause before going in, but he wanted to be away from the images that continued to harass him. "Ready?" he asked Hermione, who nodded.

Again ready to attempt wandless magic, he walked in, still holding Hermione's hand. They waited for a few seconds, but nothing happened. Looking around from the inside, they

could still see no ceiling or walls, except for the one behind them. Hermione looked at her hand and reported what they saw. "This may be the room's only feature," said Ginny, relaying Flitwick's response. "If you can't see anything, it's at least a few dozen miles in every direction." Harry remembered from Flitwick's lectures that every dimension in the room had to be the same length.

"The Dark Lord is powerful, so it could be vast," Ginny now said, and Harry didn't have to wonder who it was, since only one person around him referred to Voldemort as 'the Dark Lord.' "It could conceivably be thousands of miles in each direction."

That wouldn't be good, thought Harry, wondering how long it would take to cover thousands of miles. Probably we'd starve to death first, he thought. "I assume, Professor Snape, that this is also so we can suffer? Slow, painful death, that kind of thing?"

"Yes, exactly," came the response. "I strongly suspect that whatever is in the eighth room is something much like what was in the first three, something he believes will surely stop you. Of course, the sixth room should have stopped you as well, but it did not."

"What's the situation as far as Apparating inside a Ring of Reduction?" asked Hermione into her hand. Good question, thought Harry; if it is thousands of miles, that's our only chance.

"Professor Flitwick says, 'You can Apparate as much as you want within one room, it's just like Apparating in real life. You just can't from outside to inside, or from inside to outside.'"

"That's good, I didn't know that," he said, encouraged by the information. "Then there's hope, because I know I can Apparate without a wand, I've done it before. I should be able to Apparate us across."

"How far do you think you can go at once?" Hermione asked him, speaking into her hand so Neville could hear her question and report it to the others.

He did the same, holding up his hand. "I don't know if I want to try to go further than I can see, so maybe five miles at a time. If I can do that, and if I can Apparate once a second, I could cover three hundred miles in a minute. Even if it was several thousand miles long, it wouldn't take that long to make it across. It's definitely worth a try."

"Okay, let us know when you're going to start," said Ginny. "Professor McGonagall wants you to check in every five minutes-or what you guess is five minutes, since you don't have watches-and for me not to talk to you so you don't get distracted. If she needs to say something, Neville will say it to Hermione, who you'll be escorting, right?"

"Yes, I will, we have to stay together," he agreed. He turned to her and said, "Ready?"

She nodded, and he stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. As he was getting ready to Disapparate, he involuntarily glanced down, and once he had, found it hard to move his eyes. He suddenly received a feeling of great amusement. Now you're really getting distracted, she sent.

I didn't see this before, he sent back, somewhat embarrassed but glad that she wasn't bothered.

I should have done a spin for you, she sent jokingly. But I'm glad you like it. Not that it matters a lot, but it's good for my

ego. I've never been that happy with my body.

Why not? he sent, it's really good. I'm sure Neville's happy with it.

Yes, he is. I know it's all right, I think a lot of women feel this way. All those women in those Muggle beauty magazines, we think there's something wrong with us if we don't look like that. I hope you compliment Ginny about that often.

I do sometimes, but not that often, I just don't think of it. I'll try to remember to do it more. Okay, I'm going to start Apparating now.

Looking at the horizon, he Disapparated them away. Upon Apparating, they turned around; they could see the wall, but it was far in the distance. As he looked carefully, trying to gauge the distance, he got an impression of her, behind him, looking down, as he had at her a minute ago. You're doing that just to tease me, he sent.

Only partly, she replied with humor. What, you can but I can't? That's not fair.

No, it's just not so interesting with men, he sent, as he turned to face her.

For you, maybe, but I'll be the judge of that. I think Ginny and I will be exchanging opinions after this is all over.

Harry chuckled. You'd better not, he sent. I could do the same thing with Neville, about you.

No, you couldn't, I could feel your embarrassment just at the thought. Enough joking around, we should get going. Be careful to go in a straight line, or it could be hard to find the door once we get to the other side.

I'll do my best, he sent. Here we go.

He chose a point far ahead, and Apparated them there, then again, and again, and again. Trying his best to go in a straight line, he did manage to do it about once every second. He guessed they were traveling between five and ten miles every time, but of course, there was no way to be sure. He focused on going straight, and fast.

After a while, Hermione sent that he should stop. He did, and she said, "I'm looking ahead, forward, or what's my best guess at forward since this started. If we both turned and looked, we'd have no way to know which direction to go, since there aren't any reference points, and we don't have a wand for the Four Points spell. So I'll keep looking ahead, and you look around, see if you can see anything." She then held up her hand and started reporting in.

Harry looked in all directions, but saw nothing. "I'll start trying to go farther each time, maybe fifteen or twenty miles." She nodded, and they started again as she pointed in what she thought was the right direction.

After another period of time, they stopped again. Harry was starting to tire from all the concentration, and the scenery was exactly the same: the floor was visible, nothing else. "We must have gone over ten thousand miles by now," he reported to Ginny in annoyance. "Does anyone have any ideas about how long this thing could be?"

After a short pause, Ginny replied, "Professor Snape says that theoretically, it could be anything. Professor Flitwick... they're having a disagreement; Snape thinks it's not impossible that it's hundreds of thousands of miles, but Flitwick doesn't think it could be that long. Snape says that Flitwick wouldn't have thought it could be as long as it's

been so far; Flitwick says he can't be sure, he just thinks it's not that long."

As they argued, Harry had a sudden recollection of the last time he'd had to Apparate blindly for a specific purpose: the end of the Apparation crisis the previous summer.

Remembering how he'd helped end it, he had an idea.

"Hang on a minute, I'm going to try something." He put his hands on Hermione's shoulders, concentrated, and Disapparated. They Apparated a few feet from what was clearly the door to the eighth room.

Hermione gaped at him, and reported their position.

Anticipating their questions, Harry said to Ginny, "Tell Snape and Kingsley I did the same thing I did at the end of the Apparation crisis. They can explain it to everyone else."

"Kingsley says, 'I can tell them about it, but I can't explain it,'" reported Ginny. "Snape is telling everyone, I guess you knew he got it from your memories. And from me, great job. You're so close, only one more, and you're through."

Harry couldn't help but think that this one would be the hardest, but Ginny was happy, and he didn't want to bring her down. "Okay, we're going to open the door to the eighth room now, see what's inside." He glanced at Hermione, and placed his hand on the door to open it.

What he saw made his heart sink. It looked like a downpour, but of magic, not of rain. He looked closely to try to identify what was in it, then spoke into his hand. "It's a bunch of stuff going from the top of the room to the bottom, like the heaviest rain you've ever seen; I doubt there's a half inch between any two things. There's Killing Curse bolts, there's... what looks like foot-long strands of fire-imbued lightning, and there's metal things that are moving so fast I can't tell

what they are, but I'd guess they're the same things from the second room." In that instant, he felt sure that he and Hermione weren't going to walk out of the Ring alive. Choosing a grim understatement, he added, "So, it doesn't look real good." From how Ginny's expression had changed as he reported the room's contents, he could tell she felt the same way. She looked sick, trying to put on a brave expression and not doing very well.

Hermione had bent down to the floor, and yanked a finger out from the doorway, wincing in pain. Alarmed, Harry asked, "Are you crazy? Why did you put your hand in there?"

"Just a finger, so it wouldn't be a big deal if I lost it," she half-joked. "Don't worry, I found a spot where the stuff wasn't hitting, because of the angle of the door. Not that it matters that much, but it's also absolute zero in there."

Oh, great, thought Harry. He really put the kitchen sink into this one. Ginny reported, "Professor Flitwick is really impressed that Voldemort managed to put four separate characteristics into a room." Obviously speaking in a faint whisper so that only he could hear her, she added, "Nobody else seems that impressed. Mum and Ron gave him dirty looks when he said it. I wasn't exactly thrilled."

"I can understand that," he agreed. "This is when I'd be using the Time-Turner, if I still had it. Ask Snape what he thinks of our chances now."

A few seconds later, she said, "He says, 'My confidence remains unwavering.'"

Despite the direness of the situation, Harry laughed. "Tell him I appreciate it, and just for that, he'll get a hug when I get out."

She smiled, and relayed the message. "He says that your intuitive skills have taken a sudden turn for the worse. Speaking for myself, I don't suppose there's any chance that you'd believe me now if I told you I got a message from Albus."

"Afraid not," he said. "Hang on, let me think for a minute." Suddenly weary, he sat on the floor; Hermione joined him. He exhaled and said, "This is really amazing. I mean, we wouldn't have a chance even if we had wands, and every artifact that was ever invented. What I wonder is, why didn't he just do this in the first room? We'd have been dead before we could react."

"Maybe he just wanted to make sure we suffered first, or that he got to gloat," she suggested. After a few seconds, she added, "Or, maybe he was afraid that if you were suddenly faced with it, with no time to think, you'd instantly come up with something to defend against it. This way, you look at it in advance, and decide there's nothing you can do."

"Interesting thought, although I can't imagine what I could come up with."

"You couldn't have imagined coming up with the Cruciatus Curse shield until you did it," she pointed out

He nodded in acknowledgment. "Yeah, but this seems really different."

"'Seems' is the key word there, I think," she said stubbornly.

He thought for another minute, then said, "I should tell Ginny to tell the others to start teaching the energy of love more often, as much as they can. Maybe if enough people know it, they can defend against Voldemort better. He'll need time--"

"No!" she scolded him, and he could feel her anger as well. "You're not going to talk, or think, like that. We will get through this. We are not going to die."

He paused for a moment, taken aback. "Um... you have looked into that room, right?"

"Yes, and stuck my finger in too, if you remember," she retorted. "But I'm with Snape, you're going to come up with something. If you can't think of anything, then we're just going to walk into the room anyway, and I'll trust that something will happen before the things hit us."

"I would think that you're kidding," he said quietly, "except that I'm getting your feelings, and I know you're not. Thank you." He paused, and thought for a minute. "Okay, I'm going to think about it the way you think I should. We will get through it. The way must exist, I just have to figure out how."

"That's better," she said encouragingly. A minute later, Harry could feel her feeling of being struck by a sudden idea. "What Ginny said, that joke about her getting a message from Albus, made me think of something. You might want to try asking him yourself."

Puzzled, he asked, "You mean, try to fall asleep, or wait until I do?"

"If you have to. But I was thinking of something else. You could try to reach him here, now."

Harry shook his head. "He's said he can only talk to me while I'm asleep."

"You told us that he said it was because your mind was too active the other times," she pointed out. "There is a way to do this, I've read about it. Mystics especially do it when they

want to communicate with the deceased who aren't ghosts. The key part of it is clearing your mind, and you're already good at that. I think we should try."

"We?" he asked.

"I could help you, because of our link!" she said, suddenly becoming excited. "I could reinforce what you'll be doing. I've read that when you do this, you want to get into a really deep mental state, a place where you're not aware of anything physical. What you'd be looking for is... you know how it is when you're really involved in something, that you forget about the passage of time, or anything else? You look up at the clock and think, wow, has it been an hour already? That's the basic form of what I'm talking about. In this case, you're going to just not think about anything, clear your mind completely, for a long time. If you do it well enough, Albus will be able to talk to you, and maybe even you to him. This can work."

He nodded, again receiving her conviction through their link. "And you think he'll tell me something that'll get us through that?"

"I don't know, but it's absolutely worth a try," she said firmly. "Remember, he's helped you before when it seemed crucial, even when it wasn't what he would usually do. The whole reason he did what he did, gave up his life and went where he is now, was to defeat Voldemort. He wants that, and to protect your life so you can do that. This is the critical moment, where either you'll defeat Voldemort, or you'll die; there's no in-between. If he's ever going to do something he wouldn't usually do, it's now."

"Or maybe he can do something else, like somehow shut off what's going on in that room," Harry suggested. "Something

we can't imagine but that would help us. It's a good idea, and definitely, the best one that could be thought of right now."

"Good," she said. "Just a minute." She spoke into her hand, letting the others know what they were going to attempt, and cautioning Neville and Ginny very firmly not to look at their hands for any reason until they heard from her or Harry. Ginny joked to Harry that she'd ask Molly to take the Portkey back to the Burrow and get her an oven mitt so she wouldn't be tempted.

"I assume you just got that," he said, referring to an impression he'd just received from Fawkes, that he and Hermione should sit facing each other, holding both hands, as they had when the phoenixes had bonded them to each other.

"Yes, I did," she said. "It's interesting that they have advice like that. It must be that the kind of state we'll be looking for is one that's more common for phoenixes. Fawkes can commune with Albus, after all."

"That makes me wonder," he said, "if he wanted to tell me something, couldn't he do it through Fawkes?"

"I thought of that, but maybe it's the kind of thing he couldn't tell you that way," she suggested. "Phoenixes can't transmit some kinds of information, and the way spells work may be one of them." Harry nodded his agreement.

"Okay, let me mention a few things before we start," she continued. "While we're doing this, don't think specifically about the fact that you want to talk to Albus, or what you want him to tell you. Just decide in advance that it's your intention, then don't focus on it. Be receptive to whatever comes, even if it doesn't seem all that connected to what

you're looking for. Just keep making your state of mind deeper and deeper; stuff will come to you without you having to look for it. Okay?"

"I understand. It's a little like the energy of love, in a way, just more so. We have to focus to do that, too."

"Which is why I think we can do this," she affirmed. "Ready?"

"Let me get comfortable," he said. "Or, as comfortable as I can get, sitting naked on a hard floor. It's funny, though, it's gotten to the point where I don't even think about being naked, except for things like comfort problems. I'm beginning to see why some Muggles like to go to those nudist colonies, it's kind of... I don't know, freeing, once you get over the embarrassment."

"We'll go to one after we've graduated from Hogwarts," she teased him. "We'll get Ginny and Neville to come with us."

"Well, we have to invite Ron and Pansy, too," said Harry. They both burst out laughing at the thought of how Ron would respond to the suggestion. "Okay, I'm ready," he said after their laughter had died down.

They reached out and took each other's hands, wrists resting on their knees. Harry cleared his mind, just as he did every night for Occlumency practice. He reminded himself that he wasn't going to sleep, and then he closed his eyes and focused on having no more thoughts. He could feel Hermione doing the same thing.

He started reaching a deep state of mind very quickly, because of his link with Hermione. It was as though when she went to a deeper level of awareness, she tugged him along with her, and vice versa. Each one reinforced the other, and helped the other along. Within ten minutes, he

had no thoughts, just an awareness that he was experiencing a type of consciousness he never had before.

A few minutes later, images started coming to him. He saw himself Disapparate to the roof of a building as a child, to escape Dudley and others chasing him. He saw himself make the glass at the zoo disappear. He saw himself and Voldemort in the small, enclosed space in the airplane, as he performed the Severing Charm that took off Voldemort's hand, then snatched Voldemort's wand. A memory of Dumbledore appeared, from the first class of the sixth year, emphasizing the primacy of thoughts in magic; the image changed to Dumbledore talking to him in his sleep, during the summer. "Our thoughts are highly creative, far more so than is commonly understood in the physical realm," he heard Dumbledore say again.

Images started to come faster; he calmly let them pass, taking in each one and waiting for the next one. He saw himself telling the others that having spells come when badly needed might be a characteristic of the energy of love. He saw himself an hour ago, causing Hermione to heal serious injuries with a spell and a suggestion; she had done it because she was convinced she could. He saw Snape suffer pain after the Cleansing had been reversed because he thought he would. He saw himself come up with the area-effect Imperius Charm because he suddenly knew he could. He saw Dumbledore saying, "You would be amazed at what you can do if you simply believe that you can." He saw himself suffer terrible pain after hitting a giant in the head with a tank. He remembered how his power suddenly increased after he fell in love with Ginny. Other such images came to him, and without conscious thought, he felt as though they were pieces to a puzzle, and the pieces were coming together.

He felt another small push from Hermione, making him feel more and more that he would soon understand. He saw himself and Dumbledore in the phoenix place, as Dumbledore explained to Harry that they were creating it with their thoughts. He saw Dumbledore explaining the nature of the spiritual realm, that it was composed of love. He saw Dumbledore telling Harry that his 'power the Dark Lord knows not' was love, and for the first time connected it to the idea that the spiritual realm consisted of love. He heard the Sorting Hat sing, 'So keep in mind that you may know/What you think you do not/And what you think that you don't have/You have already got.'

Then he saw Dumbledore—not in a memory, or as he saw him in the phoenix place, but in a less physically distinct way, like a slightly fuzzy picture. Dumbledore spoke, in a deeper tone than Harry had ever heard him use before.

"Magic is thought, made manifest. Some thoughts are creative; others are limiting. You think you must use a wand, so you do. You think you cannot do certain spells, so you do not. You are now understanding what you have known all along, but did not allow yourself to believe, except in the most dire of circumstances."

In a way, it sounded much like things Dumbledore had said before, but Harry's state of concentration was so deep that he was able to put it together as he never had before. Dumbledore's words were the final piece to the puzzle; with a flash of realization, he knew what he needed to know, he understood how it worked. In an instant, he fell back into his normal consciousness.

He opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw was Hermione's face. Eyes wide, she looked at him, a question in

her eyes. He sent the question, how much of what happened did you get?

Images, feelings, just pieces, she sent. I know something important happened, I know how you feel, I know we're going to be all right. I just don't know the details, I don't know how it happened. Please tell me.

"It's better if I use words, maybe I'll send some things," he began. He related the details of what he had experienced, sending feelings when he reached the part about Dumbledore.

She stared in amazement. "It sounds wonderful. But what did you learn, or understand, about magic?"

"Anything that can be done by magic, I can do," he said simply. "And I don't need a wand."

Again, she gaped. "I don't believe it... how does that work?"

"A lot of it was stuff he'd already told me, I just hadn't put it together that way before," he said. "He had said that thoughts are highly creative, and that magic had a lot to do with thoughts. But the really important part was... he had said that the spiritual realm is made up of love, what we would call love. That's why love is the best feeling in the world, it's what the universe is made of. When we feel it, we're in tune with what we really are, where we come from. So, when we use the energy of love, and love and the spiritual realm are the same thing, what we're really doing is using spiritual energy, the energy of the universe, to put it that way. That's why it doesn't work for anything destructive, because you can't be destructive in the spiritual realm. Love in its purest form can't be destructive."

"And because it's spiritual energy, and the spiritual realm is the source of everything, there's pretty much nothing it can't do. The only things it can't do are the things it shouldn't do, like kill, deliberately cause pain, and so forth. The only reason I couldn't do things before was that I thought I couldn't. That's how I was able to come up with new spells when I needed them badly; in those situations, I managed to overlook the fact that I couldn't, or shouldn't have been able to, do the spells. Albus helped me realize that I can do whatever I need to do. And it's the same thing with wands; they aren't necessary, it's just that we think they are. It's like, if you learned to walk from being a baby using crutches, you wouldn't be able to walk without them. The energy of our thoughts is what makes the magic, not the wands. It all made perfect sense."

"It sounds beautiful," she enthused. "I hope I can learn that. You'll have to try to teach the other five of us. I could feel what you felt, and it was incredible. I'm so happy the phoenixes bonded us, that I got to share that with you."

"I couldn't have done it without you, you know," he said sincerely. "You helped me reach a state I'm sure I couldn't have gotten to on my own. And the phoenixes... I think this was what they meant, this was why they bonded us."

"It makes sense," she agreed. Looking at the door to the eighth room, she asked, "So, how do we get through that?"

"Like this," he said, as he waved his hand as though a wand were in it. They were immediately surrounded by an energy field, roughly spherical in shape, which they could see through easily. It didn't have just one color, but had horizontal bands of color; the colors of the rainbow, slowly moving up and cycling through continually. "This will protect against anything—magic, physical damage, mental attacks,

and negative environments. While you're in this, nothing can hurt you. Shall we?"

She smiled, and turned to walk through, but then stopped. "Harry... you said you can do anything that can be done by magic. In that case, could you conjure us some robes? I'd really rather not go out of the Ring like this."

Smiling, he nodded, and conjured two robes. They were shaped like normal wizard robes, but they had an unusual design: like the shield, their color was horizontal bars of the colors of the rainbow, each color gradually becoming the next. He handed her one, and as they put them on, he said, "I made them so the colors would move up, like the spell, but very gradually, about an inch a minute. I just thought it would be neat."

"Why the rainbow? For the spell, I mean? Does it have to be a rainbow?"

"No, it could've looked like anything. I just liked the idea that the rainbow covers all the colors, and this shield covers all negative magic. I think I got the idea from something Remus once did. I'll tell you about it later."

As they approached the door, she asked, "Should we tell them we're going into the eighth room?"

Harry thought for a second, and shook his head. "It'd be too hard to explain, and they'd worry. I'll explain it when we're done." He took Hermione's hand, and they walked through the door. They both looked up as they walked through, as if they were looking at rain.

"Pretty nice umbrella," she commented.

"Glad you like it," he said. They walked straight, until they reached the next door. The door opened, and he blinked in surprise as he saw Hermione look around in confusion. Except for a small bed in the far corner of the room, there was nothing there. No Voldemort. Harry activated the spell that would reveal anything invisible, but nothing changed.

He and Hermione exchanged a look of confusion, and Hermione pointed to the wall near the bed. "Look, there's some sort of display on the wall." They briskly walked over, and saw on the wall a two-foot-by-two-foot magical diagram showing each of the nine rooms. In the ninth room, there were two dots near the far wall with the names 'Harry Potter' and 'Hermione Granger' under them; it reminded Harry of the Marauders' Map.

"He's been keeping track of us, he must have been awakened when we entered the Ring," realized Harry out loud. "He must have left when he saw the eighth room didn't kill us."

Hermione shook her head. "He must have left after we got into the fifth room," she said confidently. "He thought we were dead after that, there'd be no reason for him to stay. He only waited that long because if he left sooner, he'd have been seen by the others, who would have told us, and we could have gone back the way we came. He wanted to make sure we were trapped."

Makes sense, thought Harry. "Well, no point in hanging around. Let's go." They took a few steps, and Harry put his hand on the door.

They walked through, and were suddenly outside, on the snowy ground. The first thing he saw was Ginny bolting from the shelter, running towards him so fast that he was

concerned she would slip and fall in the snow. She didn't, though, and ran into him so hard that she almost plowed him over. She held him tightly, and he could feel her start to cry. Confused for a second, he realized that they were tears of joy and relief, the pent-up emotion that she couldn't release while focusing on communicating with him, being his link to the outside world.

"I can't believe it, I can't believe it," she gasped as her crying wound down. "I was sure, we were sure you were finished." She kissed him, then hugged him again; he got the impression that she never intended to let go of him.

"It's over," he whispered. "It's all over."

She shook her head. "This one, maybe, but-" She stopped herself in mid-sentence at his smile. Giving her a significant look, he repeated, "It's all over. At least, it will be, very, very soon." Neville and Hermione had just finished their reunion, and the four headed back to the shelter.

McGonagall approached them as they entered. "Harry, Hermione... I am, not to put too fine a point on it, overjoyed to see that you made it out of there. But even more, I am completely amazed. What happened?"

Harry told the story as succinctly as he could, and enjoyed their stunned expressions when he demonstrated the rainbow shield he had used in the eighth room. "I feel like I should be surprised, too," he said, "but everything made so much sense that it just seems natural now. The energy of love makes it possible to use spells that weren't known before, and what I know now makes it possible to do anything that can be done by magic. Now, the challenge is going to be to find out exactly what that is. I have a feeling

that in some cases, the main limitation will be my imagination."

McGonagall appeared speechless, as did all of the others, even Snape. Finally, she said, "Well, as Albus said after you came up with the Killing Curse shield, it is difficult to know what to say. 'Stunning' does not even begin to cover it. It definitely makes what you did worth it, even though Voldemort got away."

Harry smiled broadly, surprising the others again. "He's not getting away."

"He already did, Harry," said Hugo somberly. "After you went into the fifth room--"

"I know," Harry interrupted Hugo. "I mean, he's as good as caught. Kingsley, would you get me some of that red stuff that Hermione put on him last year?"

Kingsley raised an eyebrow, then nodded and Disapparated. "So, I assume he came out after we went into the fifth room?" Hermione asked McGonagall.

McGonagall nodded. "It was shortly after I instructed you to move your hands and look at each other." Harry felt the mental sensation Snape had once demonstrated, and understood that Snape was 'tapping' him. A glance at Hermione told him that Snape had done the same to her, and he held up a hand to stop McGonagall's story as he and Hermione cast Legilimens.

Looking at the memory from Snape's viewpoint, out of the shelter in the direction of the Ring, Harry saw Voldemort suddenly appear. Reacting quickly, Kingsley tapped his pendant and shouted, "Full alert! Everyone to the Ring!"

Wearing the same evil smile with which Harry was so familiar, Voldemort flipped a silver disc the size of a large coin toward the shelter. As Aurors started Apparating in, Ron, Pansy, Ginny, and Neville rushed out of the shelter to assist the Aurors. Voldemort then Disapparated, and the disc projected an image of him. The full complement of Aurors was present by the time the image spoke. As it started, Kingsley quickly directed ten Aurors to Diagon Alley, ten to Hogsmeade, and the rest to the Apparation detection room.

"None of you had enough influence with him to keep him from his folly, I see," said Voldemort's image smugly. "I did warn him. You are all fools for allowing him to think he ever had a chance, but at least you may now say goodbye to him before he dies. But you need not say goodbye to me, for I will see you all again. None of you will survive for another year; I will see to that personally. Fear not; most of your deaths will be quick and relatively painless... except for Parkinson, I believe I will allow Lucius to take his son's revenge on you." In the memory, Harry saw Pansy's eyes widen in fear, and Ron put a protective arm around her shoulder. Harry remembered that at this point, they all thought he would die, which made Voldemort a far more real danger to them than he had been.

"And, of course, Snape," continued Voldemort, his expression turning from smugness to anger. "You will be made a living example of the price of betraying Lord Voldemort. You will live a long life... far longer than you will wish it to be. I strongly suggest that you take your own life now, or you will soon regret having missed the chance. You will see me soon." The image disappeared.

Harry raised his eyebrows slightly as he observed Snape's emotional state while viewing the memory; Snape was surprisingly undisturbed by Voldemort's threat, and Harry

got the impression that Snape wished that Voldemort were speaking personally, so he could retort that he still believed that Harry would prevail. Harry now understood that Snape's belief in Harry's eventual victory had been genuine, not a posture to bolster Harry's spirits.

In the memory, those in the shelter exchanged uneasy glances. Standing next to Ginny, Neville raised his left hand; Ginny grabbed his wrist and pulled it down. "We do *not* tell them about this," she said emphatically, daring with her eyes anyone to contradict her. "The last thing they need is to think about this. They have to focus."

"Miss Weasley is correct, of course," agreed Snape. "Professor Potter's mental outlook is crucial to their chances of escaping the Ring, and it will suffer if he is made aware of this. Knowing this will not help them. They will find out when they reach the ninth room."

Harry's friends traded impressed looks. Eyebrows high, Kingsley repeated, "When?"

"When," repeated Snape. "The harder things are made for Professor Potter, the more he does. The Dark Lord will regret having challenged him in such a way." Harry saw Ginny give Snape a look of appreciation, which he felt Snape acknowledge with his eyes. A fleeting emotional impression just before the memory ended told Harry that Snape sympathized with Ginny, and was glad that what he said lifted her spirits.

Hermione put down her wand. "He does love to gloat, doesn't he," she muttered.

Snape nodded. "As I have said, a weakness."

Kingsley approached Harry with a jar of the red substance. It now occurred to Harry that he needed only a tiny amount, but he hadn't specified to Kingsley how much he should bring. "He won't be gloating for long," said Harry as he opened the jar and put a very small amount onto his finger.

Confused, Ron asked, "How's that going to help find him? We need relays, and he could be anywhere in the world."

Happy that their difficulties would soon be over, Harry smiled again. "This is the part where the 'anything that can be done by magic' thing comes in handy. I might not have had this idea if I hadn't seen the Room of Requirement come up with something like it."

Suddenly next to him was an image of the Earth, much like the one of Hogwarts that the Room had created in December; the others appeared no less impressed than Neville had been at the time. Focusing on what had been absorbed into his finger, Harry concentrated, and suddenly there were ten red lights on the surface; eight closely concentrated in England, and two in Greenland, very close to each other.

"These two are Hermione and me," explained Harry to his friends. "Hermione, I assume these are the researchers, and the people you tested it on?" he asked, pointing to the lights in England.

"Yes, but we can't know that one isn't Voldemort," she said. "Any could be him. Can you tell the exact locations from the lights?"

"I can do better than that," he said. "But first, let's make sure one of those is him." The image of the earth started to spin slowly, and soon they saw one more light. Harry knew the continent was South America, but had no idea of the

location beyond that. It didn't matter, of course, but Harry supposed he should learn more geography. I'm sure John would be happy to teach me, he thought with a wry smile.

"Brazil," said McGonagall. "The rain forest, I believe. It has to be him."

"Indeed," agreed Snape. "He had various hideaways all over the world, usually in remote locations. It will be a modest structure, made invisible to observers."

"Well, let's make sure it's him," said Harry. The image started changing; the South American continent became larger and larger, and they were looking at only a portion of the earth's surface rather than at the whole planet. The red dot remained at the center of the image; the effect reminded Harry of a camera zooming in. Above the planet at first, it zeroed in on the dot. Soon a jungle was visible from above, and as the 'camera' approached the ground, they could see a small structure, similar from the outside to the one they were in. The view zoomed through the ceiling, and they could suddenly see Voldemort, sitting in a chair, apparently deep in thought.

"This won't take long," said Harry as he prepared to Disapparate.

"Professor," said Snape sharply. He said nothing more, but Harry soon felt a memory being viewed: he saw Kingsley walking with Neville, in the Auror compound, toward where Bellatrix Lestrange was being held, last summer. Harry had not actually seen the memory; he realized that he had created the image in his mind's eye as he had been told the story, and Snape was showing him that. Harry immediately understood Snape's intent; it was a request to be taken along, and something Snape felt would help him, as Neville

had been helped by his encounter with the powerless Lestrangle.

Harry nodded to Snape. "Ready?"

"You must activate the anti-Disapparation field very quickly," advised Snape. "Since you developed the ability to render him unconscious, he decided that he would instantly Disapparate upon hearing the sound of any Apparation which he was not expecting. You could find him again, of course, but it could quickly become tedious."

"He won't hear us coming," said Harry, as he and Snape vanished and appeared a few feet away. His friends gaped yet again; he wondered how long it would take for them to become accustomed to his doing any magic he wanted. "This is pretty much what phoenixes do, so I figured I could do it too. No Apparation noise." Looking at his friends again, he added, "We'll be back soon." Without a sound, they vanished again.

Harry and Snape appeared behind Voldemort, and Harry immediately put down the anti-Disapparation field. Were it Harry alone, he knew he would have just used the Imperius Charm immediately; he felt no need or desire to say anything to Voldemort, or to gloat at Voldemort's downfall. After what had happened in the seventh room, his encounter with Dumbledore, Harry felt more calm and peaceful than usual; he absently wondered if that was because he could now do any spell he wanted, or because of the deep state of consciousness he had reached.

"My Lord," said Snape, and Voldemort leaped from his chair, as startled as Harry had ever seen anyone. Voldemort turned, and shock registered on his face as he saw Harry.

"It cannot be," said Voldemort in disbelief. Looking at Voldemort, Harry knew that Voldemort was sure that someone had adopted Harry's appearance by using Polyjuice Potion. Then Harry felt the familiar sensation of Dark magic about to be used. Voldemort pointed his wand at Snape and shot a Killing Curse at him, but it was barely away from his wand when Harry's rainbow shield went up; the Curse seemed to just disappear.

Snape smiled, clearly enjoying Voldemort's astonishment. "It is my honor to again be in your presence, my Lord," said Snape, his sarcasm subtle yet clear. "Please forgive me if I do not kiss your robe."

Voldemort tried to Disapparate, and failed, which both Harry and Snape noted. "Less than an hour ago, you said you would see me soon," continued Snape. "Do you now wish to leave so suddenly? There is so much we could discuss. Surely you have more ideas about how to eliminate Professor Potter."

Fear now in his eyes, Voldemort started casting area-effect spells. The rainbow shield remained up, and Harry and Snape were unaffected. Snape gestured to the shield and said, "This is the spell which, naked and wandless, Professor Potter created in order to get past the eighth room of your Ring of Reduction, my Lord," said Snape, with a sarcastic emphasis on the last two words. "It defends against any sort of magic, though I am sure that Professor Potter will not mind if you try." Voldemort continued trying spells; Harry wondered if it was only because Voldemort couldn't think of anything else to do.

Snape slowly walked around the chair to face Voldemort; Harry made sure Snape remained protected by the shield. Snape stared at Voldemort, saying nothing, taking in the

fear and increasing panic in Voldemort's eyes. "You will pay for this, Snape—"

Snape's wand flashed, and he said "Crucio" almost casually. Voldemort collapsed and screamed, and continued screaming. Harry winced, but said nothing. He was acutely uncomfortable; he felt as though he were holding someone while another person beat them up. But Harry knew what Snape had been through, how much pain and suffering Voldemort's presence in Snape's life had caused him. Harry decided to let Snape do whatever he wanted to do.

Just as Harry had the thought, Snape stopped the spell. Voldemort looked like every other person who Harry had seen subjected to the Curse: shaking, gasping for breath, and very frightened. Snape bent to one knee and leaned over Voldemort. "I stopped for his sake, not for yours," said Snape, gesturing at Harry. Contemptuously, he added, "You deserve exactly the sort of treatment you threatened me with an hour ago. Alas, it is not a just world. But I thought you should know what that feels like from the other side."

Snape stood again, and cast Legilimens. "Your Occlumency skills seem to have declined, my Lord. You are weak, frightened, pathetic... stripped of your power, you have no more courage or fortitude than Wormtail. Having been so powerful, I suppose you never had to develop any.

"One more thing... his power is, in fact, love. That you could look at his memories and not understand that shows that the headmaster understood you better than you understood yourself. He also understood that there are indeed things worse than death, which you will be finding out very soon. His sacrifice ensured your defeat..." Snape glanced at Harry, then continued, "...and he knew the queen could be

sacrificed, because there was a passed pawn which you could not stop."

Snape was not smiling now, but Harry felt he had never seen Snape look so content; it was as if a long-held ambition was finally being realized, which Harry supposed was truly the case. Voldemort was still on the ground, unmoving, bewildered, seeming to have no idea what to do. Like a house-elf who's lost his magic, thought Harry. This is what Snape wanted, to see Voldemort like this. He can remember him this way; weak and powerless, not the one who inspired awe, fear, and terror.

Snape spoke again. "Well, I believe that is all I have to say." He bent to one knee again, his face less than a foot from Voldemort's. "Goodbye, Voldemort." He stood, and gestured to Harry that he was finished. Recovering from his momentary surprise at finally hearing Snape say the name, Harry applied the Imperius Charm, and Voldemort collapsed, unconscious.

Harry levitated Voldemort over to the bed in the corner of the room, and conjured a chair next to it. "This won't take long, it'll be much faster than it was with you."

Snape nodded, clearly unconcerned with how long it would take. He gave Harry a look, one that after so much time with Snape, Harry had learned meant Snape had something important to say.

"Harry..." began Snape, and Harry realized that it would be very important indeed. With a very serious expression, Snape continued, "Thank you, both for making that possible, and for your indulgence. I know you did not enjoy that."

Equally serious, Harry responded, "If anyone deserved to be able to do that, it was you. And I enjoyed it more than I

would like to have."

"But you would not have done it yourself, even given what you have suffered at his hands," pointed out Snape. "You have nothing to feel badly about. And to borrow a phrase I have seen you and your friends use, I would go so far as to say that your reaction passes 'the Dumbledore test.'"

Harry slowly nodded, pleased at the compliment. "Maybe. I have a feeling the others will agree with you. Anyway, thanks." Harry sat, and began imprinting love on Voldemort's mind.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 24, The Boy Who Lived: As the school year comes to an end, Harry must deal with the question of how and whether to use his new abilities to help others.

From Chapter 24: "Everyone wants to get something for nothing, politicians most of all, and they're in a position to make your life less than pleasant if you don't do something popular that they ask you to do."

24. Chapter 24

Chapter 24

The Boy Who Lived

Seven hours later, Rupert Wilmington greeted the six as they entered the Golden Dragon. "We are, of course, deeply honored to have you here," he said to the group. "The wizarding world is greatly in your debt. I refer to all of you, not only the two professors. Please, follow me."

As he led them to their table, applause started, and soon the whole restaurant was applauding. "See, I told you, those robes are a dead giveaway," whispered Ron.

"People have always recognized me fine, no matter what I wear," responded Harry. "Thank you," he said to the diners, hoping to get them to stop applauding. "Thank you very much." The clapping finally died down, and the group was seated at a relatively secluded table, near the one Harry and Ginny had sat at. Wilmington gave them menus, took their drink orders, and left them alone. Harry was glad that McGonagall had told the six that they were 'at liberty,' and needn't report back to Hogwarts until Sunday evening.

"Well, it looks like you're going to have to get used to that, at least for a while," Ron joked, referring to the applause. "Bet it happens in all your classes next week."

"I suppose I'll just have to deal with it."

"Brave man," said Ron encouragingly. "So, when do we get to see the memory in the Pensieve?"

"As soon as you've spent an hour walking around naked at the Burrow with Hermione and I there," retorted Harry humorously.

Feigning nervousness, Ron said, "Umm, I'm not sure I want to see it quite that badly. How about just the parts where you have clothes on?"

"That, you can see," allowed Harry.

"I don't see the problem with the other thing, Ron," teased Pansy. "You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"Would you do it?" he challenged her.

She appeared to think about it seriously. "Probably, if it was everyone and not only me. It would sort of be out of respect for what they had to do. I'm sure that wasn't easy."

"No, it wasn't," agreed Harry. "But the link helped, don't you think, Hermione?"

She nodded. To the others' surprised looks, she explained, "It let us know what the other was feeling, and we could respond to that, help each other feel better about it. One thing about communicating that way is that you can't lie. If Harry tried to send that he wasn't embarrassed, but he was, I'd get the message that he was trying to send that he wasn't embarrassed, but that he was."

"There's nothing that interesting to see in those rooms, anyway," said Harry. "And a lot of the communicating we did was with the link, so you couldn't hear it."

"Say, Harry, about that robe," said Ron, "you did put some clothes on under it, didn't you? I mean, you don't want to be in public when it just decides to vanish."

Harry chuckled. "Well, I did just to be comfortable, but it's not going to vanish."

"I mean, eventually," clarified Ron. "I know it won't for a few days."

"No, I mean, it won't vanish. It's here for good."

Ron's eyes went wide. "You can conjure things that'll be permanent? But that's... well, never mind. How do you know?"

Harry shrugged. "I just know."

Ron became more excited at a sudden thought. "You could conjure Galleons!"

"No, he can't, Ron," said Hermione. "Well, technically he could, but it's an energy-of-love issue. He can't, because if he did it and used them, it would be like stealing."

Ron looked incredulous. "If he made them, how is it like stealing?"

"It has to do with economics," she said. "Basically, there's a certain amount of money around. If he started conjuring money and using it, there would be more money around, but the same amount of stuff to buy and sell, so prices would get higher. Essentially, the value of the money people had would decrease because of what he did. It would be like stealing, a tiny bit from everyone that had money. So, he can't do it."

Ron looked disappointed; Harry wondered whether Ron would have been willing to take Galleons from Harry that Harry had conjured. "There is something I can do, though,"

said Harry. He looked into his right hand for a minute, then reached across the table and handed Ron a gold coin.

Ron looked at it and laughed. One side had two broomsticks crossed, with a Golden Snitch between them; the other had the three Quidditch hoops. At the bottom of the coin was the year, followed by the initials 'R.W.' "My own commemorative coin," he said as he showed the others. "Thanks. But why did it take so long to conjure?"

"I had to do it three times to get it the way I wanted it," Harry explained. "Just because I can conjure anything doesn't mean I can conjure great artwork. I have to visualize exactly how I want it to look."

Wilmington returned to their table. "Excuse me for interrupting, but these just arrived, and we thought you might be interested in seeing them." He passed out six copies of what was clearly a one-off, special evening edition of the Prophet. Hermione thanked him, and he left again.

'Potter Defeats Voldemort,' the headline read. Ron read the first paragraph out loud: "In an awe-inspiring display of magical power, determination, and resourcefulness, Harry Potter, with the help of friend and fellow professor Hermione Granger, broke through every obstacle in his path and finally captured Voldemort, rendering the evil Dark wizard permanently harmless and handing him over to the Aurors."

"I don't think he quite captures the impressiveness of what you two did," said Ginny; Harry wondered how much of the comment was a joke.

"Wow... that's what it looked like?" asked Pansy, looking at one of the pictures on the front page, which showed Harry and Hermione walking through the eighth room.

"Do you mean the shield, or the stuff coming down?" asked Hermione.

"Both, I guess," said Pansy. "It's an amazing picture. It's so vivid, I can really imagine what you must have felt when you saw what was in the eighth room."

Ron had opened the paper, which was eight pages long; the second through fifth pages had detailed descriptions of what had happened in each room, and pictures. "How did he get pictures?"

"I showed it to him in the Pensieve," said Hermione. "He got the pictures from there."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Did he have to strip down?"

She smiled. "He offered to, mostly as a joke, because he knew I wouldn't take him up on it. But he would've done it if I'd asked him to. I decided to make an exception for him. I asked Harry through the link; he wasn't thrilled, but he understood the reason, and agreed. Hugo promised me that the pictures would be... appropriate, I guess. He said, 'The Prophet is a family newspaper, after all.'"

"Looks like he did a good job editing them," agreed Ron. "In those rooms, it shows you pretty much from the shoulders up. The one from the fifth room has your expressions when you realize your clothes are gone."

"I'm glad it wasn't of us staring at each other," joked Harry.

"There are two from the seventh room," continued Ron, "one from behind, with your hands on her shoulders, doing the Apparating." I'm glad it wasn't of me looking down, Harry sent to Hermione. Her expression didn't change, but he got

the impression of a laugh in response. "The other is from when you were trying to reach Albus."

"There's a paragraph about you and Ginny," said Pansy to Neville, reading from the inside of the paper, "about how it was really difficult for you because you were both the way they communicated with the outside, and the ones with the most to lose. You're described as 'calm, but very concerned,' and Ginny as 'wearing her emotions on her sleeve.' I guess that sounds fair. Flitwick certainly found that out."

Neville and Ron laughed; Ginny managed an embarrassed smile. "He deserved it," she said defensively. "He should have known better."

Pansy explained it to Harry and Hermione. "This was something that happened when you were in the fifth room. Hermione, you asked whether it was possible to Disapparate out of a Ring of Reduction, and Flitwick said no, it wasn't. Well, Ginny practically lost it, she screamed at him. 'Are you crazy? You never tell Harry that he can't do something! He might have been able to do it, for all we know!' She was furious."

"Mainly because I was so scared," Ginny put in. "It looked like you were done for, for sure, and that seemed like a possible way out, but he took it away. I know he didn't mean to, but I thought he knew enough not to do that."

"The interesting thing," continued Pansy, "is that nobody reprimanded Ginny for doing that, even though she screamed at a Head of House. I guess McGonagall really felt for her. Nobody said anything for a minute, then Snape said, 'It is better not to suggest to Professor Potter that he cannot do a particular thing. He has shown himself to be highly... suggestible.'"

The others laughed, partly at the description of Harry, and partly at Pansy's imitation of Snape's voice. "You do a pretty good Snape," said Ron, smiling.

"Thanks. Then, Flitwick kind of muttered, 'Well, you can't.' McGonagall said, 'One also could not block the Cruciatus Curse, or the Killing Curse, or render giants harmless, or-' He just said, 'All right, all right, you've made your point.' I think he felt bad about it, even though he had given the right answer.

"Then, in the seventh room, Hermione asked about Apparating within a room. Flitwick looked surprised, then at Ginny, as if he was scared of her yelling at him again. He said, 'Uh, well, I suppose I couldn't say it's impossible...' Then Ginny said to you that yes, of course, you could do it. She gave Flitwick this look, like, that's what you were supposed to say. He kind of shrugged and said, 'You don't really need me, then, do you?' After you started doing it, he looked really surprised. He obviously thought it was impossible."

"It's kind of funny now, looking back on it," said Ron, "but at the time, there was nothing funny about it. When you lost your wands, we all thought that was it."

"Not Snape, though," mused Harry. "At first, I wondered if he really thought that, or if he was just trying to keep me in the frame of mind that I could do it. Being so suggestible and all. But yes, I thought so too, though I tried to stay positive. Voldemort definitely thought so, since he spent a whole room to taunt me. You know, thinking about it later, I understood the first three rooms a bit better. The first room was the one with the best chance to kill us, but with an animal, there was some element of luck involved. The second and third weren't that hard; he would have known

we could do them. Now I understand the whole point was to make sure we couldn't go back, that we'd have no choice but to go forward. If he'd made the fourth room like he made the eighth room, we'd have just gone back, or used the Time-Turner. He wanted to trap us before giving us something he was sure we couldn't do. He expected the sixth or seventh rooms to kill us, but made the eighth that way just to be sure. That's what Kingsley said, anyway." Harry had talked to Kingsley a few hours before, after he'd received the report from the first Legilimens to go over Voldemort's mind since he was captured. "Apparently he was absolutely sure we wouldn't survive, and was really pleased with himself at what he'd come up with. He loved the fact that the deadliest artifact he had was one that a Death Eater bought in a shop for magical sex toys. He loved the irony of it."

"There's a whole shop devoted to that?" asked Ron in surprise. "And what was a Death Eater doing in it, anyway?"

"I asked about that. Kingsley said he thinks it was just a novelties shop, but that was just how Voldemort thought of it, because of the kind of artifact it was. Like what Fred and George have, only aimed more at adults. Funny how I was asking you earlier this year, Hermione, about whether there was anything that did that, and then it almost kills us."

"Yes, I suppose there's some irony in that, as well. But you can do that now, can't you?" she asked, wearing a mischievous smile.

"I'll let you know tomorrow," said Ginny, also smiling, as the others chuckled.

"What would I do without you guys to make fun of me," he said dryly.

"Considering how everyone else is going to be treating you for a while, you should count yourself lucky to have us to make fun of you," said Pansy.

Wilmington came to their table with a tray containing cheese and crackers, and another with six drinks. As he handed Harry his, Wilmington gave him a wink, letting Harry know that he remembered what Harry had said the last time he was there.

After Wilmington left, Harry picked up his ale. He looked at his friends, reveling in the moment, and the fact that Voldemort was gone and his friends had all survived. He counted himself very lucky indeed. He lifted his glass. "To Albus," he said.

"To Albus," they repeated, and drank. There was a silence, as if they all wanted to enjoy the moment.

Harry remembered something he'd wanted to ask Ron. "Ron, what's a 'passed pawn'? It's something that Snape mentioned just before he was finished with Voldemort."

Ron asked the context, and Harry related what had been said. Ron's eyebrows went high. "That's probably the best compliment you're ever going to hear from him. I assume you all know that if a pawn reaches the eighth rank, the other side of the board, it can become a queen," he explained to the whole table. "A passed pawn is one that's on the sixth or seventh rank, that's threatening to advance and become a queen, or is very likely to at some point. Snape was saying that if Dumbledore was a queen in this chess game, you were a passed pawn—that you would become a queen. Basically, that you would replace Dumbledore, that you would be like he was."

Harry felt that he would normally be embarrassed at hearing such a thing, but he felt more touched than embarrassed. No doubt having received his feelings, Hermione said, "Yes, you would usually be embarrassed, but you know that Snape knows you better than almost anyone, and he knew Dumbledore intimately. If anyone's in a position to say that, it's him. And you know he wouldn't say it unless he really thought it."

Harry nodded. He found that, for those reasons, it meant more coming from Snape than it had from anyone who had made the comparison before. It was the first time he didn't dismiss the idea out of hand. "No, he wouldn't," he agreed. "You know, I stopped by his quarters earlier. Even now, he wouldn't express it like we would, but he was in pretty good spirits, as you could imagine. I asked him how he felt, and he gave me this look like, how can you possibly ask such a stupid question."

"That doesn't bother you?" asked Ron.

Harry shook his head. "Like he said that one time, we understand each other. I actually laughed, because I knew what he meant; it was like, yes, I'm very happy and you should know that, but you ask anyway because you want to hear me say it, which I shouldn't have to do. In a way, I'm kind of tweaking him just by asking. He doesn't like to say things like, 'yes, I'm happy;' he doesn't want to be all warm and fuzzy, but he goes a bit too far in the other direction. I just said, 'That's about what I thought,' and we talked a bit. I asked him if he had any other goals or things he wanted to do now that Voldemort is gone; he basically said that he just wants to enjoy it for now, and he'll think about that later, when he feels like it. Which is fair enough, of course. This has been his life's goal for seventeen years, that and getting back to normal."

"Neither of which would have happened without you," pointed out Neville. "Would it occur to him to thank you for that?"

"He already has, for both, in his own way," replied Harry. "In ways that wouldn't seem like much to anyone else, but I understood were a lot, for him. I know he appreciates what I've done; he just thinks such things should be understood, shouldn't need to be said. Or at least not over-said, as he might put it.

"Whereas I, on the other hand, think that if anything, I've under-said how I feel about you guys. I was thinking earlier about how I could say it—"

Ron waved him off. "Harry, you really don't have to—"

"Speak for yourself," interrupted Pansy. "I want to hear it."

"Yeah, me too," agreed a grinning Neville.

Harry chuckled, then continued. "Well, as I said, I was thinking about it, but in the end, I couldn't think of what I could possibly say. I just... I don't think words could cover it."

"Try harder," urged Pansy.

"I have an idea," said Ginny. "Send it to Hermione. She's good with words, I want to see if she can put it into words."

Surprised that Ginny would suggest it, he looked at Hermione; she nodded her assent. He closed his eyes and focused on his feelings for the others, and sent it to Hermione. He opened his eyes to see that hers were misty. "That's so sweet," she said.

She looked at the others. "He's right, it is a bit difficult. The emotion includes a very strong feeling of love, gratitude, enormous appreciation for what we've done for him... and that he thinks of us as... there's no word that combines the ideas of 'comrades in arms,' 'close or intimate friends,' and 'family,' but if there were, it would be the word he'd use. That's about the best I can do."

"You did pretty well." To the others, he added, "There's only one other thing I can think of to say. If I had only one friend like any of you, I'd feel like I'd done very well, that I was lucky. To have all of you... well, again, the trouble with words. I can't think of any."

"Have two or three glasses of ale, then try again," suggested Ron.

Harry laughed along with the others. "Maybe I will," he agreed, and took a drink. "Not bad, this stuff. It's nice to be able to drink, finally. The beginning of my nice, boring life."

"A toast," said Neville, raising his glass. "To Harry's nice, boring life."

"To Harry's nice, boring life," the rest repeated, and they drank. It was the second toast of the evening, but far from the last.

* * * * *

"You know another thing that's great about this?" Harry asked Ginny four hours later, as they lay in the bed in Harry's quarters, getting ready to sleep. "I don't have to do Occlumency before bed anymore."

"That'll be nice," she agreed. "Especially since it means that I can talk to you anytime, if you're still awake. I don't have

to worry about ruining its effect."

"All that time, something I had to do every day because of him," said Harry. "It's like this big change in my life. I'm really looking forward to, like I said, a nice, boring life."

"No one deserves it more," she said, moving in for a kiss. "Now at least if you don't go out in public, it won't be because of the danger."

"Just not wanting to be bothered," he agreed.

"Today was pretty unusual, though," she pointed out. "People aren't always going to be like that." On their way from the Diagon Alley fireplace earlier that evening, they had stopped at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. Along the way, many people had approached Harry and greeted him, thanked him, and shook his hand; he had received a half-dozen kisses from women of various ages, to Ginny's great amusement.

"I certainly hope not," he said. "But I felt like I could enjoy it a little bit, more than usual. I'm not sure why, maybe I felt like I actually deserved it this time."

"I'm glad. You definitely deserved it," she said emphatically. "You know this is going to last a while, a lot of people are going to want to get in touch with you. You should try your best to be tolerant of it."

"I'll try. I hope Hermione gets a lot of the credit too, though. She really deserves it."

"If I'd gone with you instead of her, like I wanted to, we'd both probably be dead," agreed Ginny. "On the other hand, the fifth room wouldn't have been such a big issue."

Harry chuckled. "That's one way to put it. It would've been hard to get used to, if the situation hadn't been so bad. I'm not sure if the fact that we're such good friends made it easier or more difficult."

With a teasing smile, she said, "So, if you had to compare..."

"I am *not* going to compare," he said firmly. "There's just no..." He trailed off and chuckled; Ginny asked without words what he was laughing at. "I accidentally sent what I was feeling," he explained. "She sent, tell her it's her, you idiot. Don't worry about hurting my feelings, and it's the truth anyway. If Neville asks, I'll tell him it's him, and it'll be the truth also."

Ginny smiled. "She knows what to say better than you do, you'll probably be calling her for help when we have fights. So, is this like it was when it was through the phoenixes? You don't send words, just feelings?"

He nodded. "If we're telling another person, we translate them into words, like I just did."

"And how did you 'accidentally' send what you did just now?"

"When we have a strong reaction to something, it's more likely that the other person will know about it without it deliberately being sent, which is also the case for how bonded phoenixes, like Flora and Fawkes, are with each other. I had a strong reaction because I didn't want to answer your question, I was afraid it would make her feel bad. It didn't occur to me that she'd feel it anyway."

"So, you have with Hermione the same kind of communication that phoenixes have when bonded to

people, or to each other. But Fawkes and Flora know that you and Hermione aren't married, or partners, right?"

"Yes, that's the kind of thing they can know," he said. "They wouldn't have suggested it if our lives hadn't depended on it."

She gave him a serious look. "It's all right. I'm not trying to be critical, or to give you a hard time. I know there was no choice, and I know you're worried about how this is going to affect me." She sat up in the bed, and took his hand. "I just don't know. So far it really doesn't bother me. Maybe it's because I thought for sure I was going to lose you, and I'm deliriously happy I still have you, much happier than I am that Voldemort is defeated. All I can say for now is, we'll just have to see how it goes. If it causes problems, we'll deal with them as best we can. Let me ask you, does it disturb you that this is permanent? Or is that something you shouldn't think about because it might upset her if the answer is yes?"

"First of all, it's starting to occur to me that I'm not going to have many secrets from her. It's not like she's going to know my every feeling, of course, and we may get better at not sending things accidentally. But I feel like just having the idea of wanting to keep something secret from her makes it more likely that I'll accidentally send it.

"About your first question, no, it doesn't really disturb me. The only thing that disturbs me at all is the idea that it might cause problems between you and me. I think she and I both have to adjust to it too, a bit." He paused, then added, "She says, yes, we really do. She's trying to have a conversation with Neville, and because you and I are talking about this, she keeps getting stuff from me, and it's distracting."

Ginny smiled. "Tell her to tell Neville that we're sorry, and we'll go to a different topic."

"Neville says, don't be silly, you should talk about what you want. Maybe Hermione and I should be talking about it."

"Did Hermione send her own feelings with that, or was it just Neville's answer?"

"Her mood comes through with what she sends," said Harry. "She thinks it's... I don't know if there's a word for it, sort of funny and nice, a little of each. One interesting thing about communicating like this is that you realize that when we speak, when we say we feel some way, sometimes it's not exactly right, it's just the closest word we could think of."

"I know what you mean," she agreed, lying down on the bed and putting an arm around him. "It's like, when I say that I adore you, and that I'm incredibly happy to have you... it's not exactly what I mean, but it's as close as words can come."

Happiness flooded through him as he held her. "I've had the exact same feeling."

They kissed. Then, with a gleam in her eye, she asked, "Did she get that?"

"Loud and clear," he reported. "She says that now she knows how the phoenixes feel. One of the things they like about being bonded to humans is when we feel like that, they get to feel it too. She's happy we love each other so much."

"So am I," she said, and kissed him again. "Now, how about that spell that we talked about at dinner?"

He smiled, and turned the light out with a wave of his hand. Seconds later, he heard a sigh of mock annoyance. "I meant you, not me."

Another pause. "That's better."

In the phoenix place, Harry happily embraced Dumbledore. "That was a very nice toast earlier," Dumbledore joked as he let go of Harry.

"Well, you deserved it," said Harry as they sat by the stream. "You saved me, you saved us, you helped stop Voldemort from coming back."

Dumbledore shook his head. "I know this will come as quite a surprise to you, but I was not the one who spoke to you today."

Harry blinked; surely he'd misheard. "What?"

"I was not the one who said the words you heard earlier, when you were trying to reach me," repeated Dumbledore patiently.

Baffled, Harry was sure there was some miscommunication. "Of course it was you, I saw you, I heard you."

"It was an image, since I do not exist in physical form; my current appearance may cause you to forget that from time to time. But it was not me."

"If it wasn't you, then... who was it?"

"Peculiar as it will sound, it was you." Again, Harry was sure he'd heard incorrectly. "Not you in the sense you normally think of yourself," explained Dumbledore. "I have explained before that the consciousness in which you normally exist is

but a part of your whole... entity, one could say. There are other, more spiritually based, parts of your... soul, but again, words are imprecise in matters such as this. There is a greater entity, which is you; your waking consciousness, which you think of as you, is only a part of you, the part that operates in the physical world. The part of you that is spiritually based—some refer to it as the 'higher self', let us use this term for the sake of simplicity—has a great deal of knowledge which is not normally accessible to your waking consciousness. In reaching the state that you did, you were able to access it.

"Your higher self helped you assemble the memories you saw. Only in a state of deep relaxation and focus did you see the connections, and your higher self provided the final insight which put it all together. As you pointed out immediately afterwards, the clues had been there all along, though even if you had put them together before, you would not have accepted the conclusion they led to. Your normal waking consciousness believed what it had been told about what was possible and what was not; a moment of great clarity was required to convince you otherwise."

Harry listened with great interest. "It really was amazing how everything fit together. And you're right, even though it did fit, I wouldn't have believed it. But then... if that was me, or a part of me, why did it look like you?"

"I cannot say for certain," said Dumbledore. "The likeliest answer is that my appearance was given because it was I that you were seeking. The other possibility is that it was because you knew that you would be more inclined to accept the information if you believed that it came from me."

"You mean... that my higher self did the same thing that Ginny did—say that something came from you when it really didn't, so I would believe it?"

"It may have," said Dumbledore with amusement. "We cannot know, of course."

He shook his head in amazement, then chuckled. "Ginny will love this, when I tell her. She'll probably say it means she's in tune with my higher self. Well, at least it's done, Voldemort's gone. But let me ask you... like the part of Professor Snape that stayed here for all those years, there's a part of Voldemort—maybe we can just say that it was Voldemort, since I think of Voldemort as being the 'pure evil' part—that couldn't stay in that mind after I did what I did. So, what happened to it? Did it die? Did it come up here, to move on to the next place? Can it do that?"

"That is a difficult question to answer. However, there is no particular time by which you must wake up tomorrow, so I will take whatever time is necessary to answer. This will involve concepts for which there are no precise language equivalents, but I will do my best.

"Tom Riddle was inhabited by... a malevolent entity, let us say for now. It did not take him over; he welcomed it, accepted it by choice. He was already powerful, but it made him more powerful than he had been or ever would be, by giving him ambition and focus. This entity is what you drove out, never to return.

"The nature of this entity is difficult to explain; some background is required. As I have said before, good and evil do not exist as such, universally speaking. It is more accurate to say that there is love, and there is... we could say fear, or ignorance. Ignorance in this context simply

refers to a total lack of understanding of love; fear has roughly the same meaning. In the spiritual realm, there is only love; in the physical realm, there is both love and fear. There is a great deal of love in the world, and a great deal of fear; almost everyone experiences both at times throughout their life. Love is very strong in some, fear in others. There is a spectrum, with more people in the middle than near either end of it. It is humanity's journey, the journey of all physical beings, to progress from a state of fear and ignorance to a state of love.

"We are highly creative beings, and we can create fear as well as love. The malevolent entity of which I spoke could be considered to have been created by our mass consciousness, by an accumulation of human fear. It does not know love; it cannot imagine that such a thing exists. It knows only fear, a total lack of love-what most people would call 'evil.' Since there is plenty of fear in the world, it will always find a home, a being willing to accept it and what it offers. Tom Riddle experienced a great deal of pain and fear in his early life, and sought power as a way to be in control. He made a fateful decision at a young age-a decision to embrace the entity which made itself known as Voldemort."

Harry often had difficulty following Dumbledore when he spoke about spiritual matters, but he understood this well enough. "So, this entity... it didn't die, because it doesn't have a physical body?"

"It did not die, because there is still fear in the world, which created it and supports it," said Dumbledore. "Thousands of years from now, or however long it takes humanity to evolve to its destiny-a complete understanding of love, and the nature of existence-this entity and others like it will no longer be supported, because no one will be creating it with their fears. As love grows, it will become weaker and weaker."

But no, in the here and now, it did not die. It will simply look for a new host, someone who wishes to embrace what it will offer, and give themselves to it."

"Then, did I really accomplish anything?" asked Harry, suddenly dispirited. "If it's just going to go find someone else?"

"You accomplished a great deal," Dumbledore assured him. "The reason it chose Tom Riddle is that he was the strongest and most talented wizard of his generation. Such an entity will always seek the being that gives it the greatest potential for power. You have deprived this being of the best home it could possibly have. It will find another, but very likely someone not nearly as powerful, or capable of as much damage. By defeating it, you have also secured an increase in the potential for love in your community. Such entities feed on the damage they cause, as Bellatrix Lestrange tried to do to you when she provoked you two years ago. They wish to create more fear, to make themselves stronger. Had he gained power, Voldemort could have created a great deal of fear, by ruining people's lives with violence and terror. The only true way to fight fear is with love, which is what you have done. You will continue to spread that message."

Dumbledore's last seven words sounded very right, and gave him a flash of understanding about his future. "It sounds like a good way to spend a life."

"A very good way," agreed Dumbledore. "Be aware, Voldemort's defeat and your newfound magical abilities will not guarantee you an easy and stress-free existence. You will be the most prominent person in wizarding society. The fact that you will be so different from others will cause its own problems. Some will envy your abilities and seek to create difficulties for you, difficulties that cannot be easily fixed

with magic. You will still have challenges; they will simply be different, and less intense, than those which you have experienced until now."

"I understand," said Harry. "I see your point... I guess I just feel right now, like, anything's bound to be easy, compared to what I've just been through."

"Very understandable, of course," said Dumbledore. His expression becoming more somber, he added, "On another matter, I would like to apologize for whatever part I played in your childhood having been as trying as it was. I know that I do bear some responsibility for that."

Puzzled for a moment, Harry finally realized what Dumbledore was talking about. "Do you mean that stuff that Sirius said?"

"It was not truly Sirius, of course," Dumbledore reminded him. "It was your mind, supplying your worst fears. Most had to do with you, the responsibility you felt for the dead in the struggle against Voldemort, but that part had to do with me."

Harry jumped in before Dumbledore could continue. "I don't really think that. I don't blame you for that."

"Some part of you does, Harry," said Dumbledore gently. "If that were not so, that 'Sirius' would not have said what he did. You see similarities between how I treated you and him; you feel that with both of you, too much attention was paid to your safety and not enough to your mental and emotional well-being. I am aware that you understand both sides of that situation, and 'Sirius' only discussed one side. I was not planning to go into detail in defense of my actions; you already know my reasons for what I did, and they must stand or fall on their own. I am aware that I could have taken

greater risks, which would have led to a happier childhood for you had they paid off. But as you know, I chose to err on the side of caution. I also misread the Dursleys; I did not expect that they would treat you like their own son, but I did not think they would treat you nearly as poorly as they did. Had I known... I cannot say with certainty what choice I would have made, but it would have been more difficult.

"I also wish to say that I am pleased and flattered by two indications of your regard for me which we have discussed tonight. That you would unconsciously choose my image to provide information which it was crucial that you accepted... and that seeing me in such a negative light would count as one of your worst fears, sufficient to cause it to be brought forth by the artifact in the sixth room."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," admitted Harry.

"By the way, we have a visitor," said Dumbledore. Harry looked up and, to his great surprise, saw Blaise.

"Blaise! What are you doing... oh, have you decided to move on?"

Blaise nodded. "I've spent some time talking to Albus. I wish I'd gotten to do that more while I was alive, it would've been helpful. I realized that there wasn't much point in staying around. But Albus said you would be here, and I just wanted to say goodbye, and thanks for trying to help me. It was hard for me to tell you, but I appreciated it."

Harry couldn't think of anything to say in response. He stood and hugged Blaise, then simply said, "Goodbye, Blaise."

Blaise gave Harry a small smile. "Please say thanks, and goodbye, to Neville for me." He was suddenly gone.

Harry resumed his seat next to Dumbledore, who said, "Keep in mind that in this place, thoughts can be known without the need for words. Blaise knew what you would have liked to say, even if you could not find the words."

"I'm glad. But I'm wondering, why did he decide to leave now? It seems like a real coincidence, the day after Voldemort is defeated."

"It is no coincidence, of course," said Dumbledore. "I said before that some stay as ghosts because they feel they have unfinished business. Blaise himself was not sure why he had stayed, but after you defeated Voldemort, he suddenly understood the reason. He simply wanted to see what would happen."

"Is that a common reason for staying?"

"No, it is not. In a way, this is connected to what we were talking about earlier, about the effect of fear and ignorance in a society. The more power is in the hands of what the wizarding world calls Dark forces, the more people suffer. Some suffer by losing loved ones. Blaise suffered in a different way, by being constantly exposed to those strongly influenced by fear and ignorance. His character made him particularly vulnerable, and he suffered greatly because of it.

"I believe that when he died, he looked back and wondered what the point of it was. He felt that he never really had a chance, and in a way, that was true. This is the influence that beings like Voldemort have, to cause suffering in many different ways. This is the cancer that would have spread over wizarding society had you not stopped it. You and those who have supported you have prevented many others from suffering Blaise's fate.

"In any case, Blaise eventually recognized the source of his difficulties, that he had been caught up in the path of evil. He stayed because he felt a compulsion to know the result, how the struggle that destroyed him would end. It has ended; he is content, and so has moved on."

Harry shook his head sadly. "I just feel bad that his life was like it was."

"He will have other lives," Dumbledore assured Harry, "in which his circumstances will be far better. We all live many lives, with a variety of experiences."

Dumbledore's last sentence reminded Harry of something he'd rather not have thought of. "And now that Voldemort is gone, your purpose for being here is done. You'll be moving on, too."

"Yes, but not completely. It will be gradual, as I explained last June. I will see you again in a week, then a month, then three months, then a year, and so forth. Perhaps a few dozen times over the remainder of your physical life. The last time I see you, you may well appear as old as I do now. But I will accelerate my perception of time, so that no time will seem to pass to me in between visits. To me, it will be no more than a day or two."

"I'm glad," said Harry. "It's nice to know that you'll still be around, even if I won't get to talk to you so much." He stood, and so did Dumbledore. "Thank you so much for doing this, Albus. It's meant so much to me. Like I said to my friends before, I don't have the words to tell you how I feel about you. But I know that you know."

"Indeed I do," said Dumbledore, smiling. "I will see you again, soon." The phoenix place dissolved, and Harry was asleep again.

Harry enjoyed the day on Sunday, which it seemed to him was over far too quickly. He and Ginny made a trip into Diagon Alley, and at Ginny's request, he made a conscious effort to enjoy and appreciate the reactions he got. He wanted to wear the rainbow robes, but knew they would make him far more conspicuous than he already was. The next time they went, Harry said, he would create a spell that caused passersby to think his face was that of someone they didn't know, and leave him alone.

Upon returning to Hogwarts, Harry was greeted with applause first in the Gryffindor common room on Sunday night, then by all students in the Great Hall when he showed up for breakfast on Monday morning. To his surprise, he was then applauded by both of his first-year classes, all of whom had surely joined in the Great Hall applause, he thought.

Harry and Hermione walked into the staff room after lunch. They got hugs from Sprout and a few handshakes from the rest of the staff, but no round of applause, for which he was grateful.

"So, Hermione," asked Sprout casually, "what's Harry feeling right now?"

Hermione laughed as Harry thought, ah, they're going to tease me about the link. I knew it had to be something. "He figures you're going to tease him, he just doesn't know about what. And he's happy that no one applauded."

Snape and McGonagall exchanged a glance. "So, now he expects applause every time he walks into a room," observed McGonagall.

"Quite an ego he's developing," agreed Snape. Harry grinned, since this was the first time Snape had ever teased him in the staff room. Come on, help me out, he sent to

Hermione. He reminded her that she too had been applauded, most recently by one of her second-year Transfiguration classes.

"Well, it's understandable. It's happened four times since he got back last night," she said, as she sent the message, I'm not always going to do this, just this time. "I should know, I get a burst of embarrassment every time it happens."

The teachers chuckled. "I suppose you've had a lot of that over the past two days," said Sprout. "How is that link working out? It sounds fascinating."

"It... takes some getting used to," said Hermione with what Harry thought was great understatement. "It's strange, often feeling emotions that aren't your own. I'd get it sometimes from Flora, of course, but phoenixes are less emotional than people. I've told Harry I think I have the better end of this, considering how emotional I can be. He'll have to put up with my feelings coming through all the time." She paused, then chuckled. "Now he's sending that he doesn't agree with that, but at least a good point is that I won't do things to try to embarrass him, since I'll feel it too. Although he realizes that it tends to be Ginny and Pansy who do that to him, not me. As for me, I'm going to see if I can work on helping him not be embarrassed so easily, since I'll be getting it all the time."

"See, I told you I didn't have the better deal," he pointed out humorously.

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you, when you start crying for no reason," she joked.

"That's not really going to happen, though, is it?" asked Sprout.

"No, it isn't," said Hermione. "We won't confuse each other's feelings for our own. It's strange, but at least we had some time to get used to the idea when Fawkes and Flora were sending things back and forth. This is just a more intense version of that. But like you said, it is fascinating, since it's a type of communication that humans usually can't do. It makes me wonder how our lives would be different if everyone could communicate like this."

"You could write a term paper about it, if Hogwarts had a sociology class," commented John. "But you may actually want to consider writing a scholarly article about it. I have a feeling the International Wizarding Journal would be interested in it, if it covered both your actual situation and your thoughts on what it would mean on a wider scale." Seeing Harry's blank look, he added, "It's a monthly journal that's published worldwide, very serious. It's roughly the equivalent of a Muggle medical or law journal."

"See, that's another interesting thing about this," said Hermione enthusiastically. "As soon as you mentioned it, I figured Harry wouldn't have heard of it, and I thought of sending him an explanation, like the one you just gave. But that's not the kind of information that we can send, because it's so... factual."

"That makes me wonder, Harry," said Dentus, "I've been told that you're uncertain whether your new ability can be taught. Can't you teach it to Hermione, just by sending it? Or is that information you can't send?"

Interesting question, thought Harry. "The problem is, it's not so much information as it is... just knowing. It's hard to explain. I'm pretty sure that part of what's required to know it is the sort of spiritual stuff that Albus has been telling me for the past year. If I hadn't known all that, been really sure

of it, one of the pieces of the puzzle would have been missing. Having Albus tell me about that, directly from where he was, is pretty different from me telling Hermione through the link. But I don't want to say that I can't do it, because I just don't know. I don't have the impression that sending is going to do any more good than speaking."

"Do you mean, then, that you do not think this is teachable?" asked McGonagall.

Uncertain, Harry thought for a minute. "If there's one thing I learned from what happened, it's never to think that something is impossible. But right now, I don't know how I would do it. It feels like the kind of thing you have to... like I said, just know, and I think I could tell people, but they couldn't change their beliefs so quickly. Maybe we need to work on helping people focus as much as I was, but even there, I was only able to do that because of Hermione helping me through our link, and that's unique to us two. We'll just have to see what happens. One thing I do think is that only people who can use the energy of love are going to have any chance at this."

"I do see your point," said a resigned McGonagall. "Well, we will have time to consider this in the future. As with many other things, I suspect your intuition will guide you in this."

"Also, I think if I was going to get it from him through the link, I'd have gotten it when it happened," added Hermione. "I was getting some of his images and feelings, and I got this... I can't describe it, this amazing feeling when it all came together for him. But I only got the feeling, not the information. I knew something huge had happened, I just didn't know what it was. Some things just can't be sent, and I think that was one of them."

"I'm wondering, Harry," asked Sprout, "does what you discovered explain why your magic worked in spite of the lutas, and the Four Corners artifact? Is there some fundamental difference between energy-of-love magic and normal magic?"

Harry hadn't thought about that since his revelation, but discovered that he knew the answer anyway. "Yes, it's kind of like... energy-of-love magic is kind of a more pure form of magic. Wizards have the ability to do magic, but they're not using magic to its fullest potential. Magic is, basically, tapping into the creative ability that's provided by the spiritual realm. Focusing on love creates a kind of a shortcut, or a bridge, to the spiritual realm. When you're properly focused on love, that energy is more pure, or concentrated, so it overcomes the effect of things like lutas. Of course, this is why phoenixes aren't affected by lutas-their natural magic is very much like the energy of love, which makes sense because they're such calm and peaceful creatures. And it explains why they'd be especially attracted to humans who can use the energy of love, since it's a state that's a lot like their own."

Very impressed, Sprout nodded her understanding. "I can see where that makes sense. In all seriousness, I think that what you just said would be the basis of an excellent article for the International Journal of Wizardry; perhaps Hermione could help you with it. People should be able to read about this, in a more lengthy and detailed way than the Prophet would allow. And just for me personally, you can count me as officially interested in learning the energy of love. If you start any new classes for adults, like you're doing with the Aurors, I'd like to join."

Pleased that a teacher had finally made such a request, Harry nodded. "I'll keep it in mind, I promise."

The staff room was silent for a few seconds. Dentus said, "It's ironic that you used that power to defeat Voldemort, and that's exactly the power he always lusted after, would have used to rule the world if he could have gotten it."

"In that case," responded Harry, "it's even more ironic that no one could use this power to rule the world, because as soon as whoever had it decided to use it that way, it would go away. You have to understand the spiritual part to use it, and part of the spiritual part is that people have to have free will. Or, as Albus always said, 'we all must make our own decisions.' Even if someone decided they wanted to take over the world with the best intentions, to make it a peaceful paradise, they'd lose the ability to do it, because they'd be interfering with people's ability to make their choices."

"Why is that so important?" wondered Sprout.

"Well, first of all, remember that Albus talked to me for a half hour a night, almost every night, for almost a year. This was one of his big themes, but for me, it goes all the way back to my second year, after I went into the Chamber of Secrets. 'Our choices define who we are,' he said then. He said at night that we have to make choices to learn, and learning is why we're here. Apparently, spiritually speaking, the fact that we have free will is incredibly important. This power can't be used to take that away."

"There are still things you could do, though," suggested Sprout. "You can conjure permanent things, which you could do good with without taking over. If you wanted to, you could conjure raw materials, food, energy supplies, in huge quantities, helping people who are homeless and hungry. You could probably single-handedly do a lot to clean up the environment that the Muggles have ruined..." She trailed off as Harry shook his head. Confused, she said, "Why not? I

thought you could do anything that could be done by magic. Those things could be done."

"I wish I could," said Harry sadly. "I'd love to. But I'm pretty sure I can't do anything that would have that big an impact. I mean, not that I can't, but I shouldn't."

Sprout and a few other teachers still looked confused; Harry was about to explain when, to his surprise, Snape did. "The situations which you would have Professor Potter remedy are those caused by collective choice, the result of millions of individual choices. If it were collectively wished, no one would starve or be without shelter, the environment could be protected. A vital part of free will is the freedom to make poor choices; those choices are effectively nullified if their consequences are removed." Snape certainly knows the bit about poor choices from personal experience, Harry noted through the link; Hermione sent her agreement, and noted that Snape had known Dumbledore's mind intimately, so he would understand this kind of thing better. Harry reflected that he had removed the long-term consequences of Snape's poor choice, but not before Snape had proved his desire to make new choices, many times over.

"But the people who are starving and homeless didn't choose to be that way," protested Sprout, looking at Snape as though he were being callous and indifferent.

"Unfortunately, he is right, Pomona," said McGonagall. "No, they did not individually make that choice, but that is part of the Muggle community's collective choice. As Professor Snape said, they have more than ample resources to deal with the problems if they truly wished to. If Harry created huge amounts of resources for the purpose, they would simply devote less to it. Not to mention, of course, that it would shatter wizarding secrecy. Alas, it seems that while

Harry has discovered a source of staggering power, there are many restrictions on how he can use it."

There was another silence as everyone digested McGonagall's point. Then Sprout asked, "Well, what about on a small scale? Suppose some poor wizard, maybe who just lost his home in a fire, comes up to Harry and asks him to conjure him a few dozen Galleons. Can he do that?"

"Well, I can't be conjuring Galleons in the first place," said Harry; he then gestured to Hermione, who told the teachers what she'd told him about the topic.

Dentus shook his head. "I don't think that's quite right, Hermione. If it were paper money, like British pounds, then you'd be right. But Galleons are actual gold; wizarding money is worth almost exactly what it would be worth if it were melted down. So there would be more Galleons in circulation, but they could be melted down and traded for Muggle money and resources. They have intrinsic value, in a way Muggle paper money doesn't. Now, you can make the same argument about Muggles that you just did, but consider the fact that Muggles mine for gold all the time. They're essentially creating new resources; they're just finding it, rather than literally creating it, as Harry could do. Why, then, is that not wrong? Granted, if he created enormous amounts of gold, he could drive world gold prices down. But a few Galleons here and there, or even a thousand Galleons here and there, seems utterly defensible."

Harry was about to point out that he didn't need more money, then he realized that it was more the theory than the practice that was being discussed. "Perhaps," said McGonagall, "but one could argue that if a thing is wrong on a large scale, it is wrong on a small scale."

"I'm not even sure that it would be 'wrong' if the price of gold was cut in half," argued Dentus. "Who's to say that one value for gold is right, and another isn't? Granted, since the wizarding economy is based on gold, it would affect our purchasing power vis-à-vis Muggles, but that could be compensated for. I'm not saying that I advocate Harry producing millions of Galleons, of course. I'm just saying that even on a large scale, the impact is less than clear, so there should be no small-scale problems."

"Perhaps Harry should sit down with an economist and an ethicist, and work it out," said McGonagall half-seriously. "In the meantime, I suppose he will just have to do what he feels is right."

"I must say, Harry," said Dentus, "that if I were you, I'm not sure I'd let it be known that you can conjure permanent items. Enough people are going to be wanting a piece of you as it is. If everyone knew, half the people you ran into in public would ask you to conjure something for them, and they might not understand the kind of reasons not to that we've been discussing. People might think you were being selfish, not to share your good fortune with everyone when it would be so easy for you to do so."

Sprout looked at Harry sympathetically, then said to Dentus, "I don't have to be linked to Harry, Archibald, to know that you just gave him a good scare. It's not as though he needs more people stopping him in the street."

"Yes, but now I can at least control that if I want to," said Harry. "One spell I've discovered I can do makes people in public think I'm just some average person, so I can walk through Diagon Alley and not be bothered. As for the conjuring thing, I'm not sure I'd feel right about hiding something like that. I feel as though people should know

what this can do, since I hope other wizards will be able to learn to do it. Hugo said he wants to do a follow-up article in which he gives more detailed information about what I can do; I said we should put it off for a bit while I find out what it is. Maybe if I explain it then, and at the same time explain why I can't run around doing it all the time, people will understand."

The teachers exchanged doubtful looks. "No doubt some will," said Dentus, "but the... spiritual dimension of this isn't easy to understand. I think what it may come down to is people simply taking your word for it. Even so, I guarantee you that there will be a substantial number who won't understand, who won't look past the words 'can conjure permanent items.' And a certain number of those will be in the Ministry. It may not happen soon, because your standing is so high right now, but if you make this public there will come a point when resources are needed to do something, and some politician will suggest that you conjure the resources to do it. The first one will probably be very reasonable, but it'll be the foot in the door. If you start, they'll ask more and more. Everyone wants to get something for nothing, politicians most of all, and they're in a position to make your life less than pleasant if you don't do something popular that they ask you to do. Seriously, Harry, the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that you shouldn't make this public unless there's a compelling reason to do so. As it is, some people will be jealous of your ability, not understanding the spiritual part of it. If they know about this... I can think of many ways it could be distorted, made to make you look selfish, arrogant, and so forth."

Harry sighed. "Well, that's all pretty depressing. I don't suppose anyone here disagrees with Archibald?" After a few seconds of silence, Harry nodded unhappily. "Didn't think so."

Okay, I suppose you've convinced me." I bet Albus would have let it be known, Harry sent to Hermione. He'd have just dealt with the consequences.

Not at age seventeen, she sent back. Give yourself a break, give yourself a chance to get used to it. You can always change your mind later if you really want to. We don't know what Albus would have done, anyway. If he thought it was best not to say anything, he wouldn't have. And we who care about you don't want you to be a public target.

Harry sent his acknowledgment through the link, and his appreciation for her concern. As Sprout asked Hermione about what had happened to her since going into the Ring, Harry's thoughts drifted. He wondered what Dumbledore would have done, and realized with sadness that it wouldn't be so easy to ask him from now on.

At seven o'clock that evening, Harry was sitting in one of the comfortable chairs in his quarters, waiting for Bright to arrive. He recalled that he'd first met Bright in the same setting only eight months before. Time sure goes fast when you're busy, he thought.

Right on time, the door opened. Harry stood, and met Bright halfway between the door and the chairs. "Harry," Bright greeted him.

"Rudolphus," Harry answered as they shook hands and sat.

Bright gave him a wry grin. "Well, so far, so good." To Harry's quizzical look, Bright explained, "I was afraid you'd greet me as 'Minister.' Then, I'd know I was in trouble."

"I guess that isn't the kind of thing you'd say to most people," responded Harry.

Bright shook his head. "No. I suppose I adapt my speaking style to better fit the person to whom I'm talking. Most politicians do, though most are uncomfortable speaking to someone like you, who'll just say what he thinks. They aren't used to it."

Harry nodded, but said nothing. Bright paused, then spoke again. "First of all, I want to say congratulations. What you did was... more than amazing. I know I'm far from the first person to tell you this, but even so, I did want to say it.

"Next... I'm here for reasons partly personal, and only a little political. Politically, I should do this, if only as a matter of courtesy. But I didn't want to come out here, exchange empty pleasantries, and then go. I don't think you'd care for that either. I don't want to waste your time, and I know you're still quite busy. So, to just be direct... I want to know where I stand with you. Normally, I would have a long conversation with the person in question, and we'd dance around it, I'd read signals into things he said, and so forth. But this is you, so I'm just going to ask straight out." Bright looked at Harry expectantly.

Harry paused and considered the question. "Well, to be honest..."

With a small grin, Bright finished his sentence. "You haven't given it a thought since you defeated him."

"No, I hadn't." He paused again, thinking for a longer time. Finally, he said, "I'm not sure I've changed my mind about anything since we talked last week. I understand why you did what you did, making us wait, though I'm not necessarily any happier about it. The fact that it's over makes it easier to accept, I suppose, so I'm less bothered about it. The only lingering impression, I guess, is a feeling that you didn't

really put yourself in my shoes. You didn't act like you understood what it was like for me, for us."

Bright nodded thoughtfully. "I understand that, and you're probably right. Politically, I'm excellent at looking at something through the other person's eyes. But on a personal level, I may still have a ways to go." With a rueful grin, he added, "As Madeline has reminded me, more than once. But, let's be fair, I don't think you put yourself in my shoes all that well, either. It may be understandable, since you were so sure you were right, but it may be a good habit to get into, to try to understand someone else's position even when you're sure they're wrong."

Harry nodded. "I can see that."

"Also... I'd like to know, was there any time, after the fifth room, when you thought you were finished, that you had no chance?"

Bright was giving him a searching look, but to Harry's mild surprise, Bright wasn't checking his answer. "A few times, not for very long, but I get your point. You're saying that the fact that it seemed like we were finished justifies the fact that you waited so long."

"And is that something you could agree with?"

Harry thought again. With a small smile, he answered, "I can understand it."

Bright grinned. "Good enough for now. It is good to get things from a different perspective. Until now, for you, things have been a question of right and wrong, and that's served you well. But in the future, you won't be fighting evil, and you may find that there are a lot of gray areas out there. Just something to think about."

"Now, another thing... it's been suggested to me, by more than one person, that in order to honor your achievement, a statue of you should go up in Hogsmeade Park. I wondered how you'd feel about that."

Bright had kept his face deadpan, but Harry knew very well that he was being teased. "Very funny."

Now, Bright smiled. "Well, it was suggested to me, that much was true. But I'll admit that I couldn't resist having a joke at your expense."

"That's very nice of you," Harry responded sarcastically. "But if you, or they, really want to make a statue, maybe they could do one to honor the people who died fighting against Voldemort. That would be something I could support."

Bright nodded. "Not a bad idea. I'll mention it. But in all seriousness, I would like you to accept an Order of Merlin, First Class award. I can see by your face that you'd just as soon not, but it would be for others as well as for you. Society should celebrate what's happened, and you're at the center of it. I do hope you'll agree to do it."

Harry sighed, and thought for a few seconds. "What about the other five? If I deserve it, so do they."

"I wouldn't disagree with you, but by law only one Merlin First can be given out each year. Otherwise, Ministers would give them out like party favors. They can get second class, which I was planning to do anyway."

Harry hated the idea that he was above his friends in any way, but he knew they wouldn't object, and in fact would agree with Bright. He thought again, and an idea came to him. "Okay, tell you what. I'll accept it if, and only if, you offer next year's Merlin First to Snape."

Bright looked as if he'd smelled something sour. "He'd never accept."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. But he deserves to be offered it." He stared at Bright, communicating the extent of his seriousness.

"You know, Harry, this is the first time you've ever made anything conditional with me," noted Bright. "Usually it's just yes or no. Why this?"

"Because if society wants to recognize me and my friends, they should recognize him as well. He fought so hard, every day... I just feel very strongly that he deserves it, and it's hard for me to be happy with accepting it if he doesn't get something similar."

"And if he were sitting here listening, what would he say?"

Harry chuckled. "He'd be rolling his eyes at my stupidity, telling me I shouldn't bother, that anything you get from politicians isn't worth having. But I accepted a long time ago that there are a lot of things that he and I don't agree on, and that's okay. Deep down, he'd appreciate that I feel this way, and feel that that was more important than the award itself. But it's still the way I feel, and it's important to me. So, it's conditional."

Bright sighed lightly. "You drive a hard bargain. The problem is that most people don't know what he's done, and it would be very strange to many people for someone to be given a Merlin First when what he's done isn't public. A Merlin First is a public honor, after all. So, I'll tell you what. You accept this year, and if Snape's actions are made public by the end of next year, I'll offer him the award. How about that?"

Harry hesitated, knowing that Snape would be reluctant to make his story public. Still, Bright seemed to have a point. Slowly, Harry nodded. "All right."

"Well, nice to do business with you," said Bright humorously. "Just so you know, I considered telling you that if you wouldn't accept the Merlin First, we'd go ahead with the statue."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle. "I appreciate your consideration," he said dryly.

* * * * *

On Saturday morning, he walked out to the Quidditch pitch with the rest of the team for the last match of the year; the day's match would be against Hufflepuff. There was no tension, as they had already more or less clinched the Quidditch Cup, and Harry felt a kind of nostalgia, knowing it would be his last time on the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch as a player. He imagined himself thirty years in the future, saying to students, "I used to be a Seeker, you know." It seemed like a very sad thought. As he walked, he got a message from Hermione: Look at it this way, you may not be able to play Quidditch then, but you'll be able to sleep in the same bed as Ginny every night. The thought cheered him up considerably, and he sent his thanks. He realized, too, that he would be able to play friendly matches with other former Hogwarts students; he was sure that Ron would look into it after they graduated.

Their match would be first, followed by Slytherin-Ravenclaw. As they approached the pitch, Ron asked him, "So, how do you feel about this being our last match?"

Harry sighed. "About the same as the other three times you asked me."

Ginny giggled. "It wasn't three times," protested Ron, annoyed. "Twice, maybe. I just wondered if you felt differently. I'm just going to try to savor it, enjoy it as much as I can. Don't be in too big a hurry to catch the Snitch, Harry."

"What if we fall behind? We are using the same brooms they are, after all."

Ron grunted. "I don't know why I let you talk me into not using our Firebolts. You must have been using the Imperius Charm."

Harry knew Ron was just complaining for fun. "No, as I've said, it's because we're playing Hufflepuff. You know, fair play, and all that. Besides, it's almost an empty gesture on our parts, since the only way they can win the Cup is to beat us by nine hundred points. I trust you won't let that happen."

"I'll do my best," said Ron sarcastically. "I haven't been taking any Keeper lessons from Corner, so we should do all right."

"Well, we did have a huge broom advantage—"

"And Hufflepuff pasted them pretty good in the second match, if you recall," countered Ron. "I'll be rooting for Slytherin today."

"Still holding a grudge, I see."

"Maybe he apologized to you, but he didn't to me, for that crack about my schoolwork. Just because he's a Ravenclaw..."

Ron was still muttering as they walked onto the pitch, the crowd in their seats. Harry looked around, savoring the atmosphere, sorry in a way that the match wasn't important to the Quidditch Cup. Strange, he thought, the last time I could really concentrate on a match that would win the Cup was third year, and I was too nervous then to enjoy it. Last year, I couldn't concentrate because I'd just found out that Albus was going to die, and this year, it's already decided. Well, I'll do my best anyway.

"Captains, shake hands," said Madam Hooch, and Ron exchanged a friendly handshake with William Perkins, a Hufflepuff fifth year. Harry often remembered, on hearing Perkins' name, that Professor Binns used to call him 'Perkins.' At least he wasn't impressed that I was Harry Potter, he couldn't even remember my name, thought Harry. He mounted his broom and started focusing on the Snitch. He knew that Ron wouldn't mind if the match lasted a while, but he also knew that he had to do his best to catch the Snitch as soon as he could. Being unsportsmanlike against Corner was one thing, but it was different against Hufflepuff.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and Harry took off, heading in the direction he thought the Snitch would be. Focusing hard on it, he was astonished when it suddenly flew into his hand. Madam Hooch blew the whistle again, stopping the match, as Colin shouted, "Potter has the Snitch, in... three seconds! Unbelievable!"

Harry couldn't believe it either, as Ron flew over. Nobody had gotten very far, and everyone started heading down, as if there had been some mistake. Ron gave Harry a questioning look; Harry shrugged in response. Suddenly it dawned on Harry what had happened, and he had a sinking feeling. I don't believe this, he thought. Seeing Perkins, he shouted, "William! Come over here!"

A confused Perkins followed Harry and Ron to Madam Hooch, and they all landed. "What's going on?" asked Perkins.

"I made a mistake," said Harry, feeling awful. "I was focusing on the Snitch, thinking about getting it. I didn't mean to, but I..." He paused, deeply embarrassed, then continued. "I accidentally Summoned it." Ron, Perkins, and Madam Hooch wore equally surprised looks. "I'm sorry, Ron."

This deepened Ron's confusion. "Why are you sorry?"

Now Harry was surprised; the answer was obvious. "Because not only do we have to forfeit the match, but we didn't even get to play."

"We don't have to forfeit, Harry," said Ron. "We still win."

"Of course we don't! You can't Summon the Snitch! It would be stupid if you could!"

Ron gave Harry his most tolerant expression. "All the rules say is that you can't use artifacts, and you can't use a wand. The rulebook didn't anticipate wandless magic." He gestured to Madam Hooch, seeking confirmation.

Looking slightly bewildered, she said, "Mr. Weasley is right. I know the rules backwards and forwards, and this is not covered. It's an obvious violation of the spirit of the rules, but not of the rules themselves, and I have to go by the rules. I must consider this a Gryffindor victory, by the score of--"

"You must be kidding!" burst out Harry, drawing a reproving glance from Madam Hooch. "I don't want to lose this way, but I sure don't want to win this way, either. Can't we just do it over? Call it a... I don't know, a mistake? Start the match over?"

"There is no provision in the rules for that, Mr. Potter," said Madam Hooch sternly. "The result stands, that is all."

Harry turned to face Perkins. "I'm really sorry."

Before Perkins could respond, Colin asked, "Harry, could you come up here, please?" Oh, great, thought Harry. I guess he's got no choice but to pick me, but still...

Harry flew up to where Colin was sitting, and took the seat next to him. "Capturing the Snitch in three seconds, the—"

"Colin," interrupted Harry, "whatever you do, please don't use the phrase 'Star of the Match.' I feel stupid enough as it is."

Taken aback, Colin tried to recover. "Umm, okay... for the post-match interview, Gryffindor Seeker Harry Potter. Harry, what happened?"

"I'm obviously not used to the fact that I can do wandless magic now," explained Harry. "Without meaning to, I Summoned the Snitch. It was the last thing I wanted to do, it just sort of happened. And before you ask any more questions, I want to apologize to the Hufflepuff team, both for the fact that they didn't get to play, and for how they lost. I feel especially bad that it happened against them. Hufflepuffs are about fair play, and what happened is about as unfair as it can get. Just because it's not against the rules doesn't mean it's all right."

"You weren't using your Firebolts today. I understand that was because you were playing against Hufflepuff, is that right?"

"Yes. After beating Ravenclaw like we did, we wanted to use the same brooms as Hufflepuff was using, so that if we won,

it would be fair. Kind of ironic to think of that now, but that was the idea. That was why I was at Seeker; we all decided to go back to our usual positions. If I'd known this was going to happen, I'd have traded places with Ginny."

As Colin was about to ask the next question, Perkins flew up, obviously intending to speak into the microphone. He sat on Colin's other side; Colin said, "And this is Hufflepuff captain William Perkins. Was there something you wanted to say, William?"

"Yes, thank you, Colin. Firstly, I want to tell Harry he shouldn't feel bad. He didn't mean to do it, and he asked Madam Hooch to start the match over, but she refused. He couldn't do any more than that. I also want to point out that one week ago, he walked through all kinds of certain death to get rid of Voldemort, so I think we can forgive him a mistake like this." To Harry's further embarrassment, the crowd roared its approval of Perkins' comment.

"That's very good of you, William," said Harry sincerely. "I appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I also just talked to Ron, and we agreed on something. The result of the match is final, but we didn't get to play. We agreed that after the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor will play. It won't count, and Madam Hooch may or may not choose to officiate, but it would be nice to play anyway. What do you think?" Again, the crowd cheered.

"That sounds great, William. I'd love to do that. Thank you."

Colin wrapped up the interview, and Harry headed down to the sidelines, landing between Ron and Ginny. "Thanks, Ron. That made me feel a little better."

"It was his idea," said Ron. "But yeah, I thought it was a good one. I mean, really, the match almost didn't count anyway, since Slytherin isn't going to pick up nine hundred points on goal differential. It will be nice to play. Like you said, you'll just have to switch with Ginny."

"I wonder if people will think I'm using magic now, even at Chaser."

"You worry too much," said Ginny, grabbing his arm and holding onto it. "C'mon, watch the match."

Harry didn't have the animus towards Corner that Ron did, but it still didn't displease him to see Slytherin score frequently off of him, their Nimbus 2001 brooms superior to Ravenclaw's brooms. After twenty minutes, Augustina got the Snitch, and Slytherin won by a healthy margin. "Looks like they're going to be the team to beat next year," commented Ron.

"Yeah, it seems as though someone taught them how to fly pretty well," said Ginny accusingly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," protested Ron with a grin. "Ready for the match, Harry?"

"You bet," Harry agreed. "But we thought I was going to be a Seeker, I've never practiced at Chaser on a slow broom."

"Think of it as a challenge," suggested Ginny. "You're going to do really well; Albus told me."

Harry laughed. "Oh, okay. You must be right."

"Wow, he really is suggestible," put in Ron.

The unofficial Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match went roughly as Harry had expected the real one to go. He felt he wasn't as good a Chaser as Ginny, but he scored more than his share of goals, and Ron had an excellent match. Gryffindor was leading, one hundred and sixty to fifty, when Ginny caught the Snitch. After the match, Harry sought out Perkins and thanked him for giving them the opportunity to play.

Soon after the match, people in the crowd were starting to leave. "Just a moment, everyone, there's one more thing," announced Colin. "There will now be a surprise exhibition for anyone who wants to stay to watch it. This exhibition is a match between a professional Quidditch team, Puddlemere United—" Colin paused as he was interrupted by cheers—"and a team composed of current and former Hogwarts Quidditch players, most of whom have the last name 'Weasley.'

"Entering the pitch now, please welcome Puddlemere United!" The crowd cheered again, more loudly. Harry was amazed; he had forgotten all about the idea of the match. It had clearly been kept quiet. "And joining three current members of the Gryffindor team, four former members," as the four joined them on the sidelines. Harry shook the hands of the Weasleys and gave Angelina a hug. "The Weasley All-Stars lineup: at Beater, Fred and George Weasley!" The crowd roared, with even more applause than the Puddlemere team had received; Fred and George exchanged looks of pleasure. "At Chaser, Angelina Johnson, Harry Potter, and Ginny Weasley! At Keeper, Ron Weasley! And at Seeker, Charlie Weasley!"

They walked back onto the pitch. Ron shook hands with the Puddlemere captain, clearly very pleased to be doing so. As Madam Hooch blew the whistle to start the match, Harry thought, if this is because I'm Harry Potter, I suppose I can live with it.

* * * * *

Several hours later, Harry knocked on the door to Snape's quarters. The door opened, and Snape put down the book he was reading. "Professor, please come in," said Snape pleasantly, gesturing Harry to a chair. "How was your... re-match against Hufflepuff?"

"You didn't stay to watch?"

Snape casually shook his head. "I have always tended to leave after the Slytherin match ends. Nothing personal, of course; I simply have never been very interested in Quidditch."

I wonder if that's because my father was so good at it, thought Harry, that Snape probably decided it was stupid and didn't matter. "There's another thing you have in common with Hermione, besides having been really good students," Harry joked.

"Considering her highly emotional and sentimental personality, I suspect the similarities end there," observed Snape.

"I guess so. Anyway, we won, and I had a pretty good match. Turns out I'm a fairly good Chaser even if I don't have a Firebolt. And that even if I do have a Firebolt, I'm not really a match for the pros." To Snape's quizzical look, Harry went on, "Didn't you know about the Puddlemere thing?" Snape shook his head. "Sorry, I guess that after all that time of your viewing my memories, I got used to the idea that you knew everything that was going on with me. Oliver Wood's the Puddlemere Keeper, and he got their team to come here and play an exhibition against the five Weasleys, Angelina, and me."

"No doubt they wished to test themselves against Mr. Weasley's legendary goalkeeping skills," smirked Snape, though Harry felt that even Snape's smirks were much less nasty than they used to be.

"Ron said the same thing, actually. No, I know it was probably me," agreed Harry. "Not Oliver, but the rest of the team, I'd imagine. Anyway, I managed to avoid using magic, and... well, I didn't embarrass myself, anyway. We were getting beat, a hundred ninety to a hundred ten, when Charlie got the Snitch. So we won, but they were obviously the better team. They should be, of course. Ginny was great, she got most of our goals. And I did manage to get off a couple of blind passes. I didn't think we'd be able to, since it should only work if we know the person will be open for sure, and both teams were using Firebolts, so we couldn't know that. But a few times, Hermione let me know through our link that Ginny was open, and where she was. It was kind of cheating, but it was fun." Seeing Snape's reactions, Harry added, "I know you're not that interested, you're just being tolerant, letting me go on about it."

"No, it is interesting enough. I was just thinking that I have not quite forgiven Miss Weasley for making me sit through that interminable Gryffindor-Ravenclaw match in February. I devoutly wished that Slytherin had played first that day, so I would not have been subjected to it. It was abundantly clear that she was exacting retribution against Mr. Corner, but I felt as though she were exacting it against me as well."

Harry laughed, wondering if Snape had intended for him to do so. "I'd have thought you didn't know enough about Quidditch to be able to tell."

"I do not have to know about Quidditch; I merely have to know Miss Weasley, which I do through having viewed your

memories. Unlike you, she has a... perhaps 'killer instinct' is too strong a phrase, but it is along those lines. Your conscience would trouble you if you did such a thing, but hers would not."

"I suppose not. By the way... I just got back from visiting... I was going to say Voldemort, but I feel like I should say Tom Riddle, since whatever made him Voldemort is gone. It's been a week, but he's still not really capable of talking. It's as though this part of him, the only part I left him with, has been buried for so long, and is so underdeveloped, that it can't operate on its own. I did Legilimens on him, and from what I got, it wouldn't surprise me if he was never able to function again. For him, it's as though he's waking up from a long, horrible nightmare, and the fact that I took away his capacity for normal negative feelings only makes it harder for him."

Snape gave Harry a look, the one so familiar to Harry, that made Harry think Snape was looking through him. "You did what you had to do, and you were far more merciful than he deserved. He chose to allow the Voldemort entity to consume him, and is responsible for its consequences; I have no more sympathy for him than I do for myself. I assume that you mentioned it because you would prefer that he did not suffer."

"Partly," said Harry. "I was also thinking about Pettigrew, wondering what to do. The last time I talked to Bright, he said they hadn't decided what to do with him yet; he's been kept as a rat since he came back. I think now that Voldemort's gone, that spell wouldn't work anymore. Voldemort seems to be suffering a lot for what he did, and I wondered how much Pettigrew's conscience would bother him if I reversed his Cleansing."

"I can tell you nothing about that," said Snape. "Everyone is different. We all have mental constructions to help us justify things we have done that we are not proud of. He might be guilt-ridden, or he might never give it another thought. You could find out, of course."

"I suppose I could," agreed Harry. "I'm seriously considering just leaving him as a rat for the rest of his life. Somehow it feels right. I can't accept approving his being killed; if I could do that, I would've let Sirius and Remus do it four years ago. But considering what he did, reversing his Cleansing and letting him go free, or even be under a kind of house arrest, seems way too good for him. And not reversing his Cleansing just to punish him seems... I don't know, deliberately cruel."

Snape looked as though he were trying to be tolerant; Harry knew Snape would be far less merciful than he was being. "I cannot really advise you, of course. It sounds as though what you need is to know what it is like to live as an animal for a long period of time."

Harry nodded. "I understand. I'll talk to Professor McGonagall."

"I would like to go with you," said Snape, standing. "There is something that needs to be discussed."

They left Snape's quarters. Snape turned left, heading for McGonagall's. "No, she's in her office," Harry corrected Snape.

"How do you know?" asked a curious Snape as they walked.

Harry summoned an image of the three-dimensional map of Hogwarts that he had coaxed from the Room of Requirement in December; it moved with them as they walked. "I don't

have to make it visible, I can just see it in my head," explained Harry.

"You will no doubt find all sorts of conveniences as you explore your new abilities," commented Snape. "By the way, I assume you are aware that the public is wondering why Riddle is not being put on trial, and want to know when he will be."

"Yes, Archibald told me yesterday," said Harry. "I don't see what the problem is. He's in custody, he's not going anywhere."

"I know you find it distasteful-and I am sure that Professor Dentus has already mentioned it-but the public will be comforted by justice, if not vengeance."

"I know, but killing him would be really wrong," Harry said as they neared McGonagall's office. "He's harmless, there's no reason to."

"There is the deterrent value," suggested Snape, knocking on the door, which opened.

McGonagall, remaining seated, gestured them to chairs. "Hello, what can I do for you two?"

"Professor Snape would like Slytherin to play first in all future Quidditch matches," joked Harry. He glanced at Snape, expecting a reaction, but Snape was placid.

"He is joking, of course, but that is not a bad idea," said Snape.

To Harry, McGonagall smiled a little and replied, "Yes, he has also complained to me about your Ravenclaw match. Of course, I have not even decided whether we will continue

playing two matches a day next year, as it was instituted only to facilitate security, which is no longer an issue." She appeared to think for a few seconds, then looked up. "Well, then, was that all?"

Harry chuckled. "No, it isn't. I'm thinking of asking the Ministry to deal with Pettigrew by forcing him to live the rest of his life as a rat, and I wanted to ask someone who's an Animagus how they felt about that."

"I feel that you are letting him off easy, but I suspect that is not exactly what you are asking. I do not think that it would be cruel. After all, he spent years as a rat, living with the Weasleys."

"Wouldn't it be really boring, though? With nothing to do, just whatever it is rats do, all day?"

"It is different, when you are an animal," explained McGonagall. "As I said recently, it is relaxing, though I admit I have never spent thirteen years as a cat. One does not need as much distraction. One can think, but it is not quite the same."

"Maybe I should do Legilimens on him, see how it is for him."

"If it will help..." said McGonagall, who suddenly shrank rapidly and seemed to disappear into her chair. A gray tabby cat with black stripes jumped from the chair to the top of McGonagall's desk, walked across the desk, then jumped again, into the lap of a startled Snape.

Harry laughed, both at Snape's discomfited reaction and McGonagall's humorous gesture. Snape kept his arms at his sides as the cat moved around on his lap, at one point standing on her hind legs, her front paws on his chest. Harry laughed again as Snape's annoyance grew. "Very well,

Headmistress, you have given Professor Potter his laugh, you may go now."

The cat gave him a disdainful look, turned, and jumped onto Harry's lap. She put her paws on his chest now; he smiled and rubbed her head, then petted the length of her body. She purred, to Harry's delight. Then she moved her paws off his chest, and started exercising her front claws on his lap, piercing his robe and clawing his thighs. "Ow!" he exclaimed, and it was Snape's turn to laugh. "You would do that, wouldn't you," he said to the cat, which gave him a look which he could have sworn meant, 'Well, what do you expect, I *am* a cat.' He tolerated the clawing for a minute, then the cat settled comfortably on his lap. He started petting her again, losing himself in the pleasant sensation of it.

Finally, Snape asked, "Well, have you determined anything?"

"Oh, that. I was enjoying petting her, I forgot all about the reason she did it." Continuing to pet her, he cast Legilimens. Viewing her memories of the past few minutes, he said to Snape, "I kind of see what she means. It's as though simple pleasures are nicer, more meaningful. For example, she likes being petted, but there aren't many people she'd let do it. She was paying you a compliment, you know."

"I have never been very good with animals," said Snape stiffly. Harry smiled as he continued to pet the cat. Probably because you have to show affection when you deal with animals, he thought, and Snape wouldn't be comfortable with that. He was surprised to also find a few memories: he saw her, as a cat, enter Dumbledore's quarters. He understood that occasionally she had visited him, sat on his lap, and been petted. He sensed how much she had enjoyed it, and that she missed that aspect of her relationship with

him. Seeing that helped him understand the compliment she was paying him by allowing him to pet her.

Harry and Snape chatted for a while as Harry petted the cat, who finally stood, rubbed her head against Harry's chest, then jumped back onto the desk, then the chair. A second later, McGonagall was again sitting in the chair.

"Well, did that help?" she asked with amusement.

"It made me want to get a cat," he half-joked. "But yes, it did, thank you. I sort of understand what it feels like."

"How long was it?" she asked.

Harry looked at Snape. "About ten minutes?" Snape nodded.

She looked surprised. "It felt like a much shorter time to me," she explained, "but then, it always does."

Taking on a more serious expression, she said, "Harry, there is something that Professor Snape and I need to discuss with you. It concerns your future plans. Professor Snape has told me that you do not like to contemplate the subject, but the time by which we need to know is rapidly approaching. I do not wish to have to find a new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor at the last minute."

"And I," said Snape sternly, "do not wish to be stuck with the scheduling, only to have you at the last minute decide to stay, having avoided the duty of the deputy headmaster."

"Are you sure you don't want to be deputy headmaster, even if I stay?" asked Harry. "Now, I don't see any reason you couldn't."

"You do not want to be seen as pushing me out of the position, but you need not worry; I will explain publicly the arrangement under which I accepted the position. And even though my Cleansing has been reversed, I still do not possess the proper 'people skills' that a headmaster or a deputy headmaster should have. The arrangement was temporary, and I am quite content for it to remain that way. So, you must emerge from your cocoon of denial, and embrace your future." To Harry's surprised glance, Snape explained, "You know perfectly well what choice you will make, Professor; you simply do not want to admit it to yourself. You do not want to give up your romantic notions of becoming an Auror, but you know that your place is here."

Harry knew that Snape was referring to all the time he'd spent viewing Harry's memories, and he knew that Snape was right. "Can't I stay in my cocoon a little longer?" he joked. "I suppose you're right, I just wish I could somehow do both. But I can't face the idea of not staying here."

"Not to mention that there would be a student uprising if you left," said McGonagall, amused in advance at Harry's predictable embarrassed reaction. "Very well. Please do not tell anyone outside of the other five; I will handle the announcement. And do not worry, I will show you how to assemble the schedule. Then again, perhaps you will be able to do so magically."

"No, I am sure that such a thing will not be possible to do with magic," said Snape, deadpan. "You will have to do it the hard way, as I did."

McGonagall smiled, and Harry laughed. "You're hoping I'll be suggestible about this, I see. Well, I guess we'll find out."

"One other thing, Harry," added McGonagall. "Sybil will not be with us next year."

"She's hardly ever with us now," remarked Harry, almost to himself. "What happened?"

"I suppose Albus never told you about the little ritual involving her," said McGonagall. "For the past fifteen years, every year at this time, she would come to Albus and submit her resignation, saying the fates had informed her that she should move on, or some such nonsense. He would nod understandingly, and request, as a personal favor, that she stay. With varying degrees of persuasion necessary, differing from year to year, she would allow herself to be talked into staying for another year. Albus understood that she did not truly intend to resign, but that she wanted to be reassured that she was valued.

"Two weeks after his death last year, even though she had been through it with him before he died, she came to me to do the ritual as well. To say that I was not in the mood for it would be putting it mildly; I couched my answer in the context of saying that it was important that the staff remain cohesive after his death, and so forth. I so much wanted to allow her to leave, but of course, I could not. Now, I can, and did yesterday. Professor Snape, who was with me at the time, tells me that her intention to leave was actually genuine this time, but she was still clearly offended by my disinclination to plead with her to stay." McGonagall related the story with a long-suffering air, Harry couldn't help but smile, knowing how McGonagall felt about Trelawney, a feeling he shared somewhat.

"Well, I can't say I'm bothered," said Harry. "But why couldn't you have let her leave before?" Glancing at Snape, Harry

sighed. "I see your 'don't be stupid' look, so I guess it's something obvious. But I still don't know, sorry."

McGonagall explained. "She had to be kept because of the prophecy. She did not remember giving the prophecy, so she never knew the reason, but that was it. If Death Eaters found out, or knew, that it was she who gave the prophecy, she could have been abducted and the information taken from her. It was also necessary to keep her in case she provided more prophecies, which she did, twice. Now that the struggle against Voldemort is over, we need keep her here no longer. I am seriously considering replacing Divination with a class on Mysticism. I would simply need to find a teacher who knows what they are talking about. If we find someone, Harry, you will sit in on the interview. For this in particular, you are extremely qualified."

I guess a deputy headmaster would naturally have to interview teachers, he thought. I thought it was a funny idea, at dinner with Archibald last July. Strange to think that now, I might be doing it for real.

* * * * *

One thing that Harry's magical abilities didn't allow him to do was to be instantly prepared for the N.E.W.T.s that he would be taking at the end of the year, and in early June, he started using what little free time he had to study for them. He knew he would get perfect scores on the practical applications portions of the tests for Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, and Transfiguration, but his abilities would not help him in Potions or Care of Magical Creatures. At Dentus's urging, he had decided to try the History of Magic N.E.W.T., despite not having studied the class much throughout the year. "Who knows, if you get the right kind of

question, you may be able to write about yourself," Dentus had joked.

As the last week of June arrived, Harry and Ginny were the most relaxed ones of the group, since Ginny didn't have N.E.W.T.s until next year, and Harry's job didn't hinge on his results. Neither did Hermione's, but she had self-imposed pressure, and Ron, Neville, and Pansy had to worry that their job prospects could at least be complicated by poor results, so they studied hard. Harry tried not to ostentatiously relax while they were studying; if he didn't feel the need to study, he went somewhere else.

In the next-to-last week of the school year, Harry did the year's final check on the energy of love. Twelve students joined the group who could do it, bringing the total to thirty-one. As just a number, it felt very good to Harry, but as a percentage—it was slightly more than ten percent of all students—it didn't seem quite so good. McGonagall and his friends tried to reassure him that it was an excellent result, and he had to admit that it was better than he had thought was possible at the beginning of the year. He also felt encouraged that the results would be better the next year, when students would have been practicing it for a longer time.

Harry conducted his final exams for the first, second, third, fourth, and sixth years in the same way he had the previous year, by spending ten minutes with each student, but he decided that during the summer he would work on a new way to give students their exams: he would try to create a Ring of Reduction that would contain obstacles that could be gotten past using what they had learned that year.

His N.E.W.T.s were finished by Thursday of the last week of June, and so were the classes he taught: his Friday classes

were only fifth and seventh years, and there were no classes, since all of these students were taking O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s. So, Friday was a day off for him, giving him extra time to feel nostalgic. He spent some time with the others, who each had at least one test, but were finished by mid-afternoon. He also did something he had been intending to do for a while, but had been putting off.

He materialized in the area the Aurors had used as a prison facility; he knew exactly where to go, since he had visited once before. He knew there were magical monitors to identify any entrance into the area, but he also knew that the Aurors wouldn't object to his entry. He walked to Riddle's bed.

Voldemort had always appeared pale and thin, but Riddle seemed even more so. Despite the fact that he knew it was the same person, Harry couldn't help but think, this doesn't look like Voldemort. There was something different that Harry couldn't put his finger on; he wondered if personality could actually affect a person's appearance. The thing that looked the most different about him was his expression. As Voldemort, it had always been smug, arrogant, evil; now, it was weak, frightened.

"Riddle?" said Harry, trying to get Riddle's attention. Riddle flinched, as if he'd heard something but didn't know what it was. He stared straight ahead, apparently not seeing Harry. Harry cast Legilimens, looking for memories of the past month. He discovered that Riddle's current existence was one of complete misery. Riddle could not feel anger, but he could feel sadness and guilt, and both of those feelings overwhelmed him. The knowledge of what he had done as Voldemort was literally debilitating. Riddle could barely talk, could not hold a conversation, could not even answer

questions which required a yes or a no. He was just existing, Harry understood, not living.

Harry cast the Imperius Charm, knowing it was the only way to talk to Riddle. He also knew he had to be careful; he had learned from his experience in the Ring with Hermione that he should avoid making any requests or expressing any wishes, which Riddle would then be obliged to follow.

Riddle opened his eyes, suddenly alert, taking in everything around him. He smiled, which looked odd to Harry, since he had only seen Voldemort smile in an evil way. "Thank you," said Riddle. "I never thought I would feel as I do right now. I know it is only temporary, unfortunately. I know I deserve no better, and deserve all the misery I will feel when this spell is no longer on me. Still, I am happy, at least for this moment."

Harry couldn't help but wonder how much of the person who killed his parents was the person in front of him. "Do you think there's any chance that you'll get better?"

Riddle calmly shook his head. "Not unless you give me Memory Charms to cover up everything I have done since the age of fifteen, and probably not even then. I am still alive, but my life is spent. The part of me that you drove off virtually destroyed the part of me to which you speak now; it was so deeply submerged that I would not have thought it possible to have a conversation such as this. Only the power of your spell makes it possible. As soon as you leave, I will not be able to face myself, what I have done. I will once again be the pathetic creature you saw on the bed. I am not only weak from all the years of virtual nonexistence, but totally unequipped to deal with what I have done."

Being careful not to make any definitive statements, Harry asked, "But isn't it possible to say that the person I'm talking to now isn't the one who did all that?"

"It is possible," Riddle agreed. "But it is definitely true that the person you are talking to now allowed it to happen, made the choices that made it possible. I cannot avoid responsibility for what I have done.

"I have a request," continued Riddle earnestly. "I do not deserve to be able to do so, but for as long as I can... I very much want to end my misery. I know that you will not allow the Ministry to kill me, because it is not necessary. I hope that you will be merciful enough to allow me to end my own life. I request that you take me to the Veil of Mystery, and allow me to walk through. I know from viewing your memories what awaits me. I do not look forward to it, but I am now in a living hell, one of my own making. I wish to escape it, and I can only do so with your help. Again, I know I am utterly undeserving; if anyone deserves a living hell, it is I. I ask it of you anyway."

Harry didn't want to answer right away. "Why do you say, 'for as long as I can?'"

"I can barely speak when not assisted by your spell," answered Riddle. "I could never summon the willpower to make such a request, much as I might want to. This is my only opportunity to make this request."

"It's hard for me to agree to this," said Harry. "You're asking me to... not kill you, but I would be instrumental in your death. I know you want it, but it's not easy for me anyway."

"Yes, I know this about you," agreed Riddle. "But it is what I wish. You know this to be true, and you know it is true in my normal state as well."

Harry had indeed gotten the impression from using Legilimency that Riddle wanted nothing more than for his pain to end. He knew that plenty of people would regard the current state of affairs as nothing less than poetic justice, and be quite content to let it continue. But he couldn't see the point of allowing someone to exist in pain, with no end in sight, for no other reason than that the person deserved it.

He also knew that he would be violating wizarding law by doing as Riddle asked, but he found that bothered him less than the moral question. Harry's experience was that wizarding law seemed to be no more than guidelines, to be discarded when events dictated it. Fudge had abused or violated it several times that Harry knew of, and even Bright temporarily changed it because of political pressure to allow the executions. If I do this, he thought, I'll go to them afterwards and tell them what I did, and accept the consequences. But I'm not going to go to Bright and ask him if it's all right to allow Riddle to walk through the Veil of Mystery. He could allow it, but he'd calculate the political costs and benefits, take forever like he did with my going into the Ring. No, I got him, I can make this decision. Well, Hermione helped, maybe I should ask her. She'll tell me to do what I think is right, but I should still ask.

He got a response immediately. You've been sending like crazy, she sent him. I know the whole situation. You're right, I would tell you to do what you think is right. But I think you should do what he asks. I think people should have the right to decide whether to continue to live or not, no matter what they've done.

Thanks, he sent, I'm glad to know what you think. I'm sorry I was sending so much, I didn't mean to distract you from your N.E.W.T.s. Are you finished?

I was just finishing when this started, so it's all right. If you do it, be sure to take me with you. I don't want you walking through that thing, and I can hold you back, it can't call to me. Don't go there without me.

I understand, he sent. Returning his attention to Riddle, he thought again, and realized that he had made up his mind. "Okay," he said somberly. "I'll do it."

"Thank you," said Riddle gratefully as he stood. "I am ready any time."

Harry sent to Hermione, and she asked him to wait for a minute while she went someplace private before she disappeared. A minute later, she let him know he could take her any time.

The three suddenly appeared in the room with the Veil of Mystery. Riddle looked at it, mesmerized. "So many voices... as Voldemort, I was immune to this effect. But now, I can hear the voices, hundreds of them. I had not realized..."

Harry and Hermione remained silent, solemn. Riddle continued to gaze at the Veil, then walked toward it. He went through it, and was gone.

I wonder what he meant, sent Hermione. Realized what?

I did Legilimens on him quickly just after he said that, Harry responded. Apparently you hear the voices not only if someone close to you died, but also if you killed them.

Harry suddenly felt Hermione feel great surprise, a sense of a mystery suddenly solved. Eyes wide, she said, "I just thought of something: 'One must die at the hands of the other.'"

His mouth opened slightly in surprise as he understood. "I had wondered about that... it certainly didn't seem as though it was going to happen that way, since there was pretty much zero chance of me killing him. But him walking through the Veil, under the Imperius Charm... under my influence, in a way, you could say it was 'at my hands.' Weird, how things like that work out sometimes."

"Yes, it kind of gave me a chill when I thought of it," agreed Hermione. "You know, we should leave."

"Okay, but I'm all right. I can hear the voices, but I'm not about to walk through. You know, you can feel it."

"I know," she said. "But we should still leave."

"Okay, I'll send you back to Hogwarts. There's one other place I want to go. If I'm going to be breaking laws, I want to do it all at once."

They disappeared from the room, each to a different place. Harry found himself on a very typical-looking suburban street, with trees, cars parked in front of homes, and even a few white picket fences. Casting a spell on himself that caused it to appear to others that he was wearing normal Muggle clothes, not robes, he walked up the walkway to the nearest house. First checking magically to make sure that the person he wanted was at home, he rang the doorbell.

After a short wait, a tall, fit, brown-haired man answered. "Can I help you?"

With a brief wave of his hand—even though he didn't need a wand, he still retained the habit of moving a hand when he did spells—he removed the Memory Charm that had been placed on the man. The man's eyes widened. "Professor Potter?"

"Hello, Captain Ingersoll. Yes, it's me, but you can call me Harry."

"I... I don't believe it. I thought I would never... you took that spell off me, the one that made me forget. Why? Has something else happened?"

"No, it hasn't. I just felt like... what happened in September almost got you killed, and I thought you deserved to remember it. If you'd rather not, I'll put it back on."

"No, no, I do want to remember," Ingersoll assured him.
"Thank you."

"I'm putting a Forgetfulness spell on you, it'll make you forget temporarily if you try to tell anyone else who doesn't already know about the wizarding world," explained Harry.
"Just as a precaution. A lot has happened since September, the Voldemort thing is over. You can find out about it on the internet; if you search for my name and Voldemort, you'll probably find it."

"So," said Ingersoll with mild incredulity, "this whole wizarding world is a big secret, but you can find out about it on the internet."

"Kind of a loophole in the laws. I'm sure they'll get around to closing it, at some point."

"I guess in some ways, your bureaucracy isn't much different from ours," chuckled Ingersoll. "I'll look for that. But I'd love to hear about it from you, if you'd like to come in."

Harry shook his head. "Sorry, I can't, they'll know I'm gone if I'm away too long. This isn't exactly authorized, it just felt like the right thing to do. Maybe sometime when I have more time."

"I'd like that," said Ingersoll, extending a hand. "Thanks for coming by."

Harry shook it. "You're welcome." He let go of Ingersoll's hand, and disappeared.

* * * * *

That evening, Harry once again felt nostalgic, as he took part in his last-ever end-of-term feast as a student. He sat with the teachers only for the beginning announcements, when he learned that Hufflepuff had won the House Cup for the year. He hadn't known, and with amusement reflected on the fact that who won the Cup had seemed extremely important in his first year, and now struck him as totally irrelevant. He understood that its purpose was to give the point system meaning, and so to encourage good work and good behavior among the students, but he wondered if it was very effective; he couldn't remember ever having done anything deliberately to try to get points, or not doing something to avoid points being taken away. Then he smiled, wondering how many points Hermione had earned for Gryffindor over the years by knowing almost every answer there was to know. He supposed that even if students didn't make specific efforts to get points, it was a way of letting students know what was and was not approved of. He had given points for students saying Voldemort's name, so it had worked for him as a teacher, if not as a student.

Before announcing the winner of the House Cup, McGonagall had given a short speech to honor the memory of those who had died at Hogwarts during the year, eighteen in all. She recited the names, then asked for a moment of silence. Then she pointed out that it was a good year in that Voldemort

had been defeated, and offered her thanks to all who had helped make it happen.

She then announced that Professor Snape was stepping down from his 'temporary' appointment as deputy headmaster, and that "...taking over the position of deputy headmaster will be Professor Harry Potter." The applause was as loud as Harry could remember having heard in the Hall; he focused on Ginny talking to him in her hand, and Hermione's feeling of pride. He waved, hoping it would cause the applause to end sooner. He was happy for the support, even though he could have expected it. He thought about how, as deputy headmaster, he would be taking the first years from Hagrid in September and escorting them to the Great Hall to be Sorted. Something about the thought made him hopeful for the future.

The next morning, Harry and his friends boarded the Hogwarts Express for the last time. They didn't have their trunks; taking advantage of Harry's new abilities, they'd had him send their trunks and pets to the Burrow before they got on the train. It didn't seem quite the same, thought Harry, not having to struggle with trunks and cages. Somehow that seemed part of what the Hogwarts Express was all about, though Fawkes and Flora were with them.

They got the same compartment at the back of the train that they'd had on the way in, due to Harry having put a spell on it to make people think it was full. "Maybe that's not quite fair of me to do," he conceded when Hermione asked about it, "but it doesn't seem like such a big deal."

The others agreed, but Hermione wasn't sure. "It just doesn't seem right, to use your abilities to get some benefit at other people's expense, even if it doesn't hurt them."

"Come on, Hermione, it's just seats on a train," pointed out Ron, his tone making it clear he thought she was being overly fussy.

"Yeah, it's not as though I broke the law or something," said Harry humorously.

She sent mild irritation through their link. "That's different, I can defend that. What you did there was moral, not something for your own convenience." Harry had told Ginny on his hand the night before about what he had done, but hadn't had a chance to tell the others, so he did. They were surprised, but not stunned, as he had thought they might be.

"It sounds like you did the right thing," said Neville.

"What I wonder is, why didn't I read about it in the paper this morning," said Hermione. "I looked carefully, there was nothing."

"I went to Snape's office to say goodbye an hour ago," said Harry. "I told him and McGonagall yesterday, neither of them were bothered, except naturally Snape thinks I was too good to him. I hadn't noticed about the paper, but he had. He thinks the Ministry didn't announce it because they, or Bright, aren't sure how to present it. I'd be content for them to just tell the truth, of course. Snape thinks they might not want to admit I did something illegal if they're not prepared to punish me for it, which they won't."

"Did you tell Bright what you did?" asked Ron.

Harry nodded. "He was far more bothered that I did it without authorization than that I did it, period. There was never any question of him trying to charge me with anything; he admitted that if he tried to charge me, 'I would

be removed as Minister, then beaten to death with clubs.' I tried not to laugh, but it was funny."

"Also true, I'm sure," added Hermione.

"Which, I also didn't say, is one of the reasons I don't have the greatest respect for the law," continued Harry. "It seems like the law should be applied to everyone, no matter who they are. Anyway, he gave me this little lecture on not using my power to do stuff like that, not to impose my will on society just because I can. I told him I didn't do it because I could, but because it seemed like the right thing to do. He understood that, but he still gave me this look, like he was disappointed in me. You know the one, Ron, that Albus gave us when we flew the car. Except that with Albus, I felt guilty about it. With Bright, I didn't care."

"He doesn't exactly have the moral standing to make you feel guilty," agreed Neville. "Now, Hermione, on the other hand..."

Everyone laughed. "Yes, that's true," agreed Harry. "I told him not to worry, that I didn't plan on running around breaking the law all the time."

"Just occasionally," joked Ron.

Changing the subject, Hermione asked, "Did Professor Snape say anything about the article this morning when you talked to him?"

"What article?" asked Pansy.

"Oh, that's right, you ate at the Slytherin table," recalled Hermione. "So I guess you didn't read the Prophet."

"The second years aren't all that interested in the Prophet," pointed out Pansy.

"They would've been, today," said Hermione. "There was a big article about Snape. Yes, I was surprised too, when I found out he agreed to it. It was a pretty long article; it was almost his life story, in a way. It was all about his role in the Order, what he did, how he spied on Voldemort, that kind of thing. It also talks about the Cleansing for the first time publicly, and how Harry reversed it. What I want to know, Harry, is why he agreed to it."

"Hugo spent an hour around him the day we went into the Ring," explained Harry. "It was the first time he'd ever been around Snape for so long, and he got a pretty good read on him. At some point he got the sense that Snape felt he wouldn't mind what he did being known, even if some of it made him look bad. He persuaded Snape to let him do it, partly for the historical record, and partly because he deserved it. Hugo interviewed me for the article, of course. I said some nice things about him, but I was also honest, about what happened before sixth year.

"Snape's one condition for the article was that it couldn't appear any earlier than today. The last thing he wants is students coming up to him after class asking him about it. He figures they'll have mostly forgotten about it by September, and for most, he's probably right. I just think he feels it's right that he's recognized for what he's done. Anyway, to answer your question, Hermione, I teased him about it a little, saying I heard some students wanted his autograph. He just gave me that annoyed look he often does, and said that he didn't think they'd be making a Chocolate Frog card of him anytime soon. But it's obviously not the kind of thing he's going to want to talk about, just to bring up and chat about."

"I'm just glad Hugo didn't interview me for the article," said Neville.

"I don't know, he was fine in our Potions classes," said Ron, who Harry assumed was unaware of the depth of Neville's problems with Snape. "For him, he was a pussycat."

"I don't think I can get myself to think of him like that," responded Neville. "But I'll admit, he was a lot better than he had been. Which isn't saying much, of course. Now, Sprout, that's how a professor should be." After a second, Neville glanced at Harry and Hermione, hastily adding, "And you two, of course."

The others laughed. "Nice save, Neville, but a little late," chuckled Pansy. "So, Harry, what are you going to do now, I mean, where will you stay? Now that security's not an issue anymore..."

Harry looked at Ginny. "I'm not in a huge hurry to leave the Burrow, and for now, we can sleep in my quarters at Hogwarts. I don't think we'll really change that much until Ginny graduates. Then we'll really have to decide what we want to do; we'd probably get a house then."

"Which Harry will create new charms to keep invisible and inaccessible," joked Ginny. "Ron, Pansy, how about you?"

"Probably we'll just stay at the Burrow, at least that's the plan for now," said Ron. "We'll both be really busy, me with the Auror training, and her with the Healer course. I'll be getting a half-salary for being in the Auror training, so we could technically afford an apartment, but it would be tight, and it's too convenient living at home, with Mum doing all the cooking and cleaning. If the price I have to pay is Mum constantly asking when we're going to get married, I guess I can live with it."

The others exchanged grins, knowing how Molly was. Harry didn't think Ginny would be able to resist, and he was right. "So, Ron, when are you—"

"Very funny," Ron cut her off.

Pansy answered the question. "We seem to be getting along all right," she said, with a teasing smile at Ron, "but we don't need to be in a hurry to decide that. We've decided that we're not going to decide anything like that until we're both done with our training, so at least three years. We'll be together at the Burrow, so nothing will be different. But yes, I'm sure Molly will ask regularly anyway. I don't mind, it gives me something to bother Ron about."

"That's probably part of the reason Mum does it," grumbled Ron. "How about you two?" he asked Neville.

"For now, the same as Harry and Ginny," said Neville. "The Burrow during the day, her Hogwarts quarters at night. The question is what happens after I start the training course, which officially starts in early August, and then when school starts in September. The Hogwarts quarters aren't really intended for couples, but Professor McGonagall has told Hermione that it's all right if we use that as our home for a while. How long we do that depends on how we like it, or how convenient or inconvenient it is. The good part is that house-elves do everything for you; the bad part is you can't Apparate there. Well, I can't, anyway," he joked, with a glance at Harry. "So I can Apparate to the Hogwarts gate and walk through, get a lift from Flora, or have Harry do his new thing, and send me back and forth all the time. I know you already said you don't mind," he added, anticipating Harry's objection. "It's just not a long-term solution."

"We'll probably start looking at apartments very soon, just to see what's available," added Hermione. "Fortunately, with my salary and Neville's half-salary, we'll be all right, money-wise. And I've saved almost all my salary from this year, so we could make a good down payment on a house. And if we stayed in my Hogwarts quarters for a year and saved our money, we could almost afford a house outright."

"I guess you'll be visiting your parents more, now that it's safer," suggested Ginny.

Hermione nodded, looking as though she'd been reminded of something she'd rather not have been. "I also need to have a talk with my parents. You know I've been keeping all this from them, so they wouldn't worry. Well, now that it's over, and I'm semi-famous in the wizarding world for going into the Ring with Harry, I'm going to sit down with them and tell them everything. I've felt bad about more or less shutting them out of my life. But I'm not looking forward to it. I don't know how they'll react."

Harry didn't know either, and didn't know what to say. He decided that feelings were better; he sent, it may be difficult, but you're their daughter and they love you, this won't change that.

I know, she sent back, it's just going to be hard. But thanks for the support. Aloud, she said, "At least, now it's the post-Voldemort era, we could call it. If that's the worst of my problems—and it is—that's a pretty good situation."

They talked about Harry's experience with Riddle the day before, Harry giving the others detailed impressions. An hour into the trip, the trolley came, and Ron bought ten Chocolate Frogs. "It might have the new version of your card," said Ron, with poorly disguised false innocence.

"You know it doesn't come out until tomorrow," Harry chided him. "And you're a really bad actor."

"I have to act this badly," protested Ron. "I could lie better, but then you wouldn't know I was lying, and you'd miss the point."

"Well, I still think I'm a better actor than you," responded Harry with a satisfied grin. "I told you that they were updating the card, with things about Voldemort and the new stuff I can do, but they also changed it in a way I didn't tell you, since I wanted it to be a surprise." He reached into his robes, took out a card, and handed it to a confused Ron.

The picture was of Harry in the rainbow-style robes he'd created, with the caption "Harry Potter" at the bottom. Ron started to turn it over, but Harry stopped him. "No, keep it on this side for a minute." With a light shrug, Ron did so... and a few seconds later Harry's picture and name faded, replaced by the words "Ron Weasley" and a picture of Ron in Auror robes, wand out, the image from Harry's memories. Ron gasped, stunned, as Harry handed out cards to all the others.

"It should change again, in a few seconds... ah, there we are," said Harry, as Ron's image and name faded, to be replaced by Hermione's. "It cycles through all of our pictures, staying ten seconds on each one. You can use your wand on it, to stop the cycle, so it stays on any given picture." As Harry explained, the picture changed to Ginny's, then Neville's, and finally Pansy's.

"That's so nice, Harry," said Pansy, smiling at Ron's reaction. "I assume this was your idea?"

He nodded. "I didn't exactly have to twist their arms, though. When they told me they wanted to update the card,

I suggested this, and they agreed immediately. They thought it was a good idea."

Ron had stopped the card's cycle on his name and turned the card over to read the information about him on the back. He looked at the front again, and Harry realized how deeply affected Ron was. His eyes were filling with tears, which he was obviously trying and failing to hold back. A tear escaped his eye and rolled down his cheek.

Harry couldn't help laughing. "Oh, Ron... I'm sorry, but... everything we've been through over the past few years, the trauma, the happiness, all the emotion of it, good and bad... and you never cried, until now. *This* is what it takes to get you to cry! I should have known."

Ron looked at Harry with both gratitude and annoyance as he wiped tears away. Just for a second, Harry saw Ron's true emotion in his eyes, and he knew it was similar to what he'd tried to say at the Golden Dragon not long ago. Harry smiled, and Ron shook his head and wiped away another tear. "Wanker," he muttered.

Harry laughed again, and put an arm around Ron. "I love you too, Ron."

"He's not the only one who's crying, you know," put in Neville, who Harry could see was also strongly affected. "Thank you, Harry. This means a lot to me, to all of us. Maybe more to me and Ron, but you know what I mean."

"You deserve it, all of you," said Harry emphatically. "Remember, to get on a card, you're supposed to have done something really impressive. Not only were you the first ones to learn the energy of love after me, but you kept me alive while the world's most dangerous Dark wizard was

constantly trying to kill me. I think that counts as an extremely impressive achievement."

Ginny leaned over and took his hand. "Maybe, but it was still nice of you to do. I don't care for these cards especially, but I can't say it's not really great, especially the way it was done. Not one card each, but one card with all of us. It seems more fitting."

"I thought so," he agreed. He stood, and the others looked at him in surprise. "Going to the bathroom already?" asked Pansy. "It's only been an hour."

"No, I've decided to amaze you all with an incredible act of bravery," said Harry with mock pomposity. "I'm going to walk the length of the train, stop by all the compartments, and talk to people for a few minutes." Smiling at their reactions, he added, "See, I really have amazed you."

"What brought this on?" wondered Ginny.

"I was just thinking about how I was going to miss doing this. I still could, of course, but it seems different as just a teacher, not a teacher and a student. Besides, everyone knows me, so I'm not going to get the same reactions I would in Diagon Alley. It seemed like an opportunity I'm not going to get again, in the same way."

"That's great, good for you," Hermione encouraged him. "Just don't spend more than a couple minutes with each group, or you won't be able to talk to everyone."

"Don't worry about us," added Pansy. "We'll just talk about you after you're gone."

"I appreciate that," he joked back as he left the compartment.

He returned to their compartment with less than an hour to go in their trip. They chatted the time away quickly, and soon the train was pulling into King's Cross. Feeling it strange not to have to drag his trunk out of the storage areas, Harry and his friends waited behind those who did, and filed out of the train. It didn't take them long to find Molly, waiting for them on the platform. "Mum, you didn't have to come," pointed out Ginny. "We were just going to Apparate home."

"I know, but it just seems right for me to be here," said Molly. "It'll feel strange two years from now, when there won't be anyone for me to meet here." She looked unusually pleased about something, and Harry soon found out what. "Oh, Harry, Dudley was over earlier. He told me that his parents have invited you over for dinner, whenever it's convenient."

"You must be joking," was all Harry could think of to say, astonished as he was. Many emotions went through him in a short time; he sent to Hermione, I must be sending everything I'm feeling.

Yes, you are, it's understandable, she sent back. I think this is one of those things that Albus said magic wouldn't help you with. Just do whatever you think is best.

"Speaking of incredible acts of bravery," he muttered. "First, I'm going to talk to him, ask him some questions about how they seemed when they told him this. But if it seemed like it was genuine, then I guess I'll do it." Turning to Hermione, he said, "Tell you what, Hermione. I'll sit down with your parents and tell them about everything you did, and you have dinner with my aunt and uncle. How about it?"

The others smiled in sympathy for Harry. "I think I'd actually take you up on that," said Hermione. He nodded,

understanding that what she would do was still harder than what he might do, and at least he had a choice.

"Ready to go?" asked Molly, as Harry occasionally waved goodbye to people passing by.

"There's one thing I wanted to do first, before we went home," said Harry. "The statue gets unveiled tomorrow, there'll be a big ceremony. But I want to take a look at it now, just be able to see what it looks like. I won't be able to do that tomorrow, there'll be too many people."

"Aren't there charms and magic detectors keeping people away from it?" asked Molly.

"Yes, but I can get us past them, obviously," said Harry. "It's covered, no one will know we were there."

"And you promised Bright you wouldn't run around breaking the law all the time," joked Ron. "Just kidding, I'd like to see it too, without a whole bunch of people around. You'll teleport us there?"

"I haven't decided what I'm going to call it yet, but 'teleport' seems like a reasonable word," said Harry. "But yes, the devices around the statue would detect Apparations." Making eye contact with everyone to make sure they were ready, Harry waved his hand. It was in the park in Hogsmeade; Harry had checked the location before boarding the train so he would know where to take everyone.

They were suddenly under a white covering, which looked to Harry like a large blanket; it covered the area within ten feet of the statue in every direction, and was three feet above the top of the statue. Harry heard mild gasps as they saw it for the first time. It was made of silver, on a foot-tall oak platform. The base of the statue was rectangular, two feet

wide and long, and five feet tall; words were chiseled into all four sides. On top of that was a sculpture of a phoenix, again in silver, about four times larger than a phoenix's true size.

They stepped back a little so they could see the phoenix better. "It's beautiful," breathed Hermione.

"Really nice," agreed Ron. "It must have been expensive, though, if the silver plating is real."

"It's real," said Harry. "I conjured some silver for them to use. I gave it to Molly to give to them, she told them that it was anonymously donated. Which is true, I suppose."

"Cool," said Ron. "It's great, but won't someone try to steal... oh, never mind, you'll have put up defenses around it. With what you can do now..."

"It's very safe, believe me," confirmed Harry. "Anyone who tries to steal it will get teleported to the confinement areas at Auror headquarters."

"That seems very efficient," commented Neville. "Ah, here's the dedication." Neville was looking at the text chiseled into the silver on the side he was currently facing. He read, "We honor those who gave their lives in this generation's struggle against evil. We recognize that the struggle continues, and vow to remain vigilant. We fight, not only with magic and bravery, but also by forging bonds of friendship among ourselves, and between ourselves and others. We must never forget those who have fallen, especially when we face the choice between what is easy and what is right."

"That's very good," said Hermione. "That last phrase, is it from what Albus said when Voldemort came back?"

Harry nodded. "I do have some influence, it turns out. I did my best to make sure that phrase got in there. Molly kept an eye on it for me. Considering that this had to be approved by committees, I'm amazed the wording came out as well as it did."

"It wasn't easy," said Molly, who had been one of the leaders of the group of the relatives of Voldemort's victims; the group had been instrumental in pushing the project through the Ministry so quickly. "There were all kinds of squabbles. For example, Raymond Turpin objected to the phrase 'gave their lives,' he thought it should be 'lost their lives.' Fortunately, most people preferred what ended up there. I just hope people who read it in the future take the words seriously."

"I hope so too," agreed Harry. "One thing I do know is that I'm going to find a way to work those ideas into my lectures."

"If students will take them seriously from anyone, it's you," said Ron. Harry glanced at Ron with appreciation; it wasn't often that Ron said something like that. Ron nodded his acknowledgment, then busied himself in reading the other sides of the statue's base. "So, these are the names of everyone killed by Voldemort or the Death Eaters?"

"Yes," said Molly. "Both from this time, and seventeen years ago. The total ended up being four hundred and twenty-four."

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione. "Sirius's name is here! I'm surprised, I thought he was still considered to have been guilty."

"He was, officially, but Bright knew better," said Harry. "He knew how important Sirius was to me, and as a favor, he

made sure Sirius's name got here. Even if he only did it to get my goodwill, I still appreciated it."

Ginny found Neville's grandmother's name, and asked, "Neville, did they ask you if you wanted your parents' names here?"

Neville nodded. "I thought about it, but it just didn't seem right, since they're still alive. I know it's as though they were killed, but still..."

Harry scanned the names, lingering on the ones he recognized. Lisa Turpin, Percy Weasley, Sarah Dentus, Thomas Dalton, Cedric Diggory, Blaise Zabini, Ernie Macmillan. The names brought memories flooding back. So many names, he thought. This had such a high cost. Thank God my friends came through it all right, but not everyone I cared about did. Sirius, and... ah, there it is. Albus Dumbledore. If anyone gave his life rather than lost it, it was him.

Harry found the ones he was looking for: James Potter, Lily Potter. Oddly, he found a blank space before 'James Potter', enough space for one name. "What's this?" he asked, pointing it out to Molly and Hermione, who were nearest him.

"Well, that wasn't my idea," admitted Molly, "and I know you may not care for it, but most people wanted it there, and I think it's appropriate. The names are in alphabetical order, and this is... kind of a silent tribute, a celebration of something that didn't happen." She paused, but Harry didn't know what she meant.

She looked at Harry, love in her eyes. "The blank space is for the one who was supposed to have died, but didn't. The Boy Who Lived."

The End

* * * * *

This is the end of Harry Potter and the Ring of Reduction. The third story of this trilogy, Phoenix Intuition, immediately follows.

Next: Phoenix Intuition, Chapter 1: Three years after leaving Hogwarts, Harry faces a sudden choice as to whether to use his unusual powers to help innocent people, or to allow them to die when he could have saved them.

From Phoenix Intuition, Chapter 1: I could save some, he thought. Yes, you could, he replied, but when to stop? Another hundred? Five hundred? Two thousand? No matter how many you save, you'll want to save them all, and every one you save increases the chance that what you do will be noticed.